

Shouji Gatou

Illustrator
Yuka Nakajima

#06



Amagi
Brilliant
Park

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

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Amagi Brilliant Park







This merry-go-round shone a white light, comprising the colors of all kinds of joy. Its radiance might be the most beautiful out of anything in the park.

“I believe that you already know,” she said with a sad smile.



A magi Brilliant Park GIVE ME SUMMER EVENT IDEAS!

• Summer Event Ideas

- Fireworks show
- Festival
- BBQ
- Test of courage

AH...
HOW ABOUT A FIRE-
WORKS SHOW?

BEACH PARTY!
...AH,
I GUESS WE
COULDN'T...

HOW
ABOUT A DOUJIN...
I MEAN,
A SHELLFISH
HUNT?!

OCTOPUS!!

NUDIST-

BLAM

Mii!



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Prologue

“I love you, zo! Moffllllle!” the evil pirate Ironbeard cried from the deck of his burning ship.

“Moffu...” Across from him stood Lord Moffle, the Fairy of Sweets. In his hand was a cutlass, a curved sword popular during the age of exploration.

In the midst of a chaotic battle, this destined showdown had manifested. Incidentally, the “I love you” that the pirate Ironbeard shouted wasn’t meant romantically or homoerotically; it was the kind of “I love you” that you shout to your mortal enemy during their final battle. It was just the sort of “Hah! That was a fun battle!” that a boss shouts to the hero while riding a bloodlusty adrenaline high, so it’s important not to get the wrong idea.

Anyway, here’s how Moffle responded: “Enough, Ironbeard! Your evil deeds end today, fumo!”

Ironbeard replied: “Har! I’ll make fish food out of you, zo!”

The swordfight began. Moffle and Ironbeard clashed, slashed, guarded, dodged, and leaped. Thrilling music played; sound effects enhanced the action.

“Moffu!” Moffle was beaten back.

Ironbeard was a large-bodied mascot based off of an elephant seal (zo-arashi in Japanese, hence his “zo” speech tic). His beard was indeed made of iron (for some reason), and he could use his tail to attack. “Zo! Zo! Zoooo!” He held a sword in each hand and one in his tail; three swords in all. His attacks came from left, right, and above. They were powerful and relentless.

“Moffu!” Moffle dodged, skirted, and jumped. But before long, he was forced back to the prow of the ship. It was a desperate situation.

“Heh heh heh,” the pirate cackled. “Nowhere left to run, zo!”

“Grrr...” Moffle growled. There were man-eating sharks in the water below.

Even now... ah, look! The evil man-eating shark Jaw circled, maw open to

devour any soul unfortunate enough to fall! “Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarsh, feeeeeeme! Feeeeeeeeeeeeeeme feeeeeeeeeeeeeeme! Ryaaaaaa, neeeeeefooooooooo!” Jaw shouted incomprehensibly. These were his only lines in the battle, so he was chewing the scenery like mad. That said, he was still a real shark, so he was automatically terrifying.

Though he was the Fairy of Sweets, Moffle took the form of a mouse— He probably looked like a tasty treat to Jaw. An elephant seal in front of him, a man-eating shark behind him... Danger all around! What will become of our Moffle?!

“Ngh... is this the end, fumo?!”

“Moffle!” Ironbeard jeered. “Prepare to die, zo!”

“Halt!” Just then, the dolphin samurai, Kenjuro, dove in. He wore a black lacquered samurai breastplate with vermilion trim, and a helmet with a dolphin-shaped crest. He blocked the strike directed at Moffle, then sent Ironbeard’s sword flying with a brilliant twist of his sword.

“Ngh... zo?!” Ironbeard was too shocked to react.

“Moffu!” Moffle cried with relief. “Kenjuro?!”

“Moffle-dono! This unworthy Kenjuro has come to thine aid!”

“Much obliged! Now let’s go, fumo!”

“Indeed!” Kenjuro agreed.

The battle resumed. It was a grand spectacle, brimming with special effects.

“Zo!” Ironbeard was driven back to the central mast. Kenjuro cut through some nearby rigging, which caused the course sail to come loose. It fell and struck Ironbeard’s tail. “Zo?!”

“That’s the power of justice, fumo!” As Ironbeard reeled over in pain, Moffle kicked him, roped him, and then cut another line of rigging. The yard fell on top of him, and he was bound up in the shrouds.

Moments later, the great bulk that was Ironbeard was hanging suspended over the deck. “Zo! Zo! I... I surrender, zo!” Ironbeard cried in terror. The fur seals that worked for him immediately surrendered to Moffle’s allies.

“Moffu! Have you learned your lesson, fumo?!”

“F-Forgive me, zo! I’ll never do wicked things again, zo!” the now-helpless Ironbeard shouted to Moffle and Kenjuro. “I’ll go straight, zo! I’ll dedicate my life to keeping peace on the oceans, zo! Please spare me, zo!”

“That’s what all villains say!” Moffle announced. “But your desperate please won’t save you, fumo!”

“Zo...”

“Your crew will be beheaded! Then you, Ironbeard, will be tortured, leading to a public execution as an example to all, fumo!”

“Eek!”

“You pirates have troubled mortal children for the last time!” Moffle finished. “Let your sad end be a message to future generations! Prepare to die!”

The stage went black, and a pleasant narration played: “And so the evil pirate Ironbeard and his crew were executed. Splash Ocean ran red with the blood of the pirates, and peace and prosperity returned. Thank you, Moffle, Fairy of Sweets! Thank you, Kenjuro the Dolphin! The seven seas belong to you!”

A beautiful melody played. The good guys returned to the stage, illuminated by cutting-edge lighting techniques. They bowed to the audience and launched into a happy dance. Moffle held up Ironbeard’s (prop) head, while Kenjuro and his ocean friends held up the (also prop) heads of the fur seals. A triumphant fanfare played, fireworks popped, and the show was over.

“Um, so...” Kanie Seiya muttered as the rehearsal came to an end. “The ending still feels a little off...”

“How dare you, fumo! You’re the one who told us to simplify it for kids!” Moffle, who had been standing there confidently after the rehearsal ended, suddenly flew into a rage. “Justice triumphs, evil is punished! There’s no more basic expression of morality, fumo!”

“Still... executing enemies that beg for their lives, then parading their heads around...” Seiya said. “You don’t think it would be a little traumatizing?”

“Wickedness must be punished! That message is important, fumo! After all, these guys—” Moffle pointed behind him. The villains (Ironbeard, and his fur seals, and the shark Jaw) were just standing there blankly. “—are evil pirates! They’ve attacked cities, killed men, raped women, stolen gold and food, fumo! You can’t show them mercy!”

“Hmm. Well, we may be ex-pirates, but we never did anything that bad, zo,” Ironbeard said uncomfortably.

“Shut up, fumo! I mean in the show!”

Ironbeard and his crew were indeed pirates who’d once ravaged the shores of the magical realm, Maple Land. They’d raided port towns on the shores of the states of Fumorida and Moxas, stolen loose change from vending machines, snatched lunches out of convenience store dumpsters, swiped paper recycling off the curb and sold the still-readable manga to Book-Off—all quite wicked deeds.

They’d been apprehended by Maple Land’s coastguard this year, and they were about to be thrown into the state penitentiary when they worked out a deal to perform at Amagi Brilliant Park, instead.

They apparently qualified for the Plush Program, which was a criminal rehabilitation program enacted by Maple Land law. (One of the park’s headliner mascots, Tiramii, had also come to AmaBri under this program.) That’s how Ironbeard and his fur seal crew had ended up performing in Splash Ocean’s live show this summer.

Jaw, the man-eating shark that had threatened to eat Moffle in the show, had been a member of the cast for longer. While on land, he looked like an adorable two-heads-tall shark mascot, in the water he had the ability to transform into a highly realistic, enormous Great White. He looked so scary this way that he frequently made children cry; and, on top of that, he had a bit of a speech impediment. Apparently even in Splash Ocean, they never quite knew what to do with Jaw.

Seiya and Moffle continued to spar over the plot of the show.

“You don’t think their crimes are a little excessive?”

“You mean stealing trashed manga and selling it to Book-Off, fumo?”

“Not that. I mean in the show!” Seiya critiqued. “Pillaging and killing... it’s too gruesome.”

“Realism and impact is important, fumo. And it’s more exciting when the bad guys are powerful and cruel.”

“Umm...”

“Besides, the original script had more nuance, fumo. What is good? What is evil? Can justice truly exist? Is not the true enemy the weakness that exists inside of man? ...It was full of themes like that.”

“That’s all well and good,” Seiya argued back, “but it was so complicated that people got bored!”

In the original version of the live show, “The Pirates’ Grave,” Ironbeard’s family had been slaughtered in a previous war, and he was taking revenge against the people responsible. The dolphin Kenjuro was an elite soldier who’d been involved in the killing, and was tormented by guilt over his crime. Moffle was a lawyer with the navy’s legal department, who was dispatched to investigate, despite grappling with a secret alcohol addiction. There was no flashy action; the most intense scene came when Moffle, representing Ironbeard in court, asked the jury, “how do we define the crimes of war?” The show ended with Moffle standing before the grave of Kenjuro (who had taken his own life) and renouncing alcohol. It was very moving and deep, but Seiya had rejected it immediately.

“All that social drama and angst between silly mascots...” he scoffed. “It was two hours long! And it showed our headliner mascot as an alcohol addict!”

“That’s why we simplified it, fumo. ‘The bad guys are bad! Let’s set things right by killing ’em all!’ Isn’t that what you wanted, fumo?”

“Now it’s *too* simple!” Seiya objected.

“Then what do you want from me, fumo?!”

Just then, Ironbeard interrupted. “Wait, zo! If it’s complaints we’re voicing, we’ve got a few of our own, zo! I want a scene where we flirt with the women

we've captured, zo!"

"That's not what we're talking about, fumo!"

Kenjuro also raised his hand. "If I might join the proposals. I believe that I, Kenjuro, have ascertained the heart of the problem!"

"Oh?"

"The final scene should be not a beheading, but seppuku!" he announced.

"That's not the heart of the problem at all!"

The shark Jaw then weighed in. "Yeeaaaaahlikthat! Maaaryloughta eatemall!"

"You need to do something about your diction first!" Seiya told him.

"Graaawelll'lldomybest!"

"Enough of this jabbering, zo!" Ironbeard threw his pirate hat onto the deck. "I say we have a brawl and adopt the idea pitched by the last man standing, zo! Then no one can complain, zo!"

"That's so stupid—" Seiya began.

"Moffu! Bring it on!"

"Stop—"

"A battle royal?!" Kenjuro opined. "I am in favor!"

"Wait—"

"Ryeeeeeahgotit!" Jaws roared. "I'mmmagonnadomybest!"

A brawl broke out. Seiya tried to stop it, but he ended up being swept into the violence. Then the fur seals joined the fray, adding to the cacophony of jeers and shouts of rage. It was far more intense than the swordplay in the show; kegs and cannonballs were thrown about, and countless mascots fell into the pool.

Sento Isuzu heard the commotion and came running, and it took just over a minute for her to shoot every person there to death with her musket. This meant that Isuzu was declared the winner, and her ideas were adopted:

Ironbeard's gang would no longer be plunderers and murderers; their evils were limited to stealing treasure and the like. The execution was also scrapped; the pirates would apologize, and be forgiven.

"Is everyone in agreement?" Isuzu said, holding aloft the magical gun Steinberger, its barrel red hot from firing. Of course, nobody argued with her. Even Seiya, who had been shot in the confusion, just moaned in response.

1: Hard Working Man

Guests poured through the new entrance gate; families, couples, groups of friends. Nearly all of them were smiling in delight.

The front plaza, Entrance Square, had undergone a complete transformation. It was now a wide-open, breathtaking space. There was a grand fountain that resembled the Trevi Fountain, which was surrounded by carefully-textured cobblestone paths. All around, chalk-white buildings shone like the villas over the Aegean Sea, standing out brilliantly against the cobalt July sky. It was a perfect portal from the everyday to the wondrous.

The instant they passed through, everybody forgot that they had come here by bus or car and bought an entry pass in yen. They truly believed they were in a magical realm. The guests familiar with the old Entrance Square were especially dumbfounded by the sight: *This is that AmaBri?* they seemed to think. *Amagi Brilliant Park, the poster child for crummy amusement parks?*

The cast met the guests with pride and confidence. Fairy of Sweets Moffle, Fairy of Music Macaron, Fairy of Flowers Tiramii—all put on magical performances. A live drum and fife band played. Mascots took souvenir photos. The stalls were no longer “Treat Stand” and “Gift Shop” — they had been redesigned to match the setting, bearing more fabulous titles like Concessions Stand and Souvenir Store.

After bathing in the magical mood around the entrance, the visitors would filter out into the five areas: the magic-themed Sorcerer’s Hill; the adventure-themed Wild Valley; the ocean-themed Splash Ocean; the scifi-themed Astro City; and Etceteland, with its miscellaneous fun.

None of these areas could be seen from Entrance Square; the new white buildings were designed to block them from view, which meant that guests couldn’t see the attractions until they entered the appropriate area. In other words, you wouldn’t have one area’s theme ruining the fantasy by intruding on another. It was unlikely that most guests would notice, outside of fanatics and

industry types, but it was still an ingenious design.

Seiya sat in a small room on the second floor of Entrance Square, looking down and reading the guests' minds, one after another:

«I don't know what they did, but it's impressive.»

«Wow... is it based off of Santorini?»

«I haven't been here in ten years. Was it always this great?»

«Wow! Wow! Wow!»

«What construction company did this? I'll have to look it up later...»

«The kids are so excited. I hope they don't trip and fall...»

«Maybe I'll bring a date here some time...»

«What's this? What's this?»

«Wow! But I kind of liked the atmosphere of the old version...»

It was about 90% positive reactions. There were inevitably dissenting opinions here and there, but people were definitely overwhelmed by the view from the entrance. *Yes! A success!* Seiya thought exultantly, and found himself pumping his fist.

Sento Isuzu was standing beside him. "Are you using your mind-reading magic?" she asked, perhaps having taken note of his gesture.

"Yeah," he admitted. "It's more reliable than a survey... I took a random sampling of twenty or thirty, and the response is very positive overall. Of course... you hardly need magic when you see smiles like those."

"Well... I'm glad to hear it." Isuzu let out a sigh of relief. Her concern was only natural; the Entrance Square revamp had cost a lot of money.

Thanks to the maniac speed and tireless work of the Mogute Clan, they'd finished construction in only a week (though it had been inconvenient for the guests in the meantime, having to use a seedy-looking makeshift gate). But of course, it hadn't been free. They'd managed to keep labor costs down significantly, due to the speed of construction and using their own construction workers, but the fees for the building materials and machinery rentals were

considerable. It had literally cost hundreds of millions of yen.

“If the renewal failed,” Isuzu said, “it would have been a bad blow.”

“It was never going to fail. It was my idea!” Seiya bragged.

Most of it had indeed been Seiya’s idea, from the overall concept to the layout, color choices, and lighting. Taramo, Dornell, and Wrenchy-kun had applied themselves to the execution of his vision, taking into account his every request. This planning portion had actually taken longer than the construction.

“Did you expect me to come up with anything less than perfection?” he scoffed. “From the flow of traffic to the sight lines, it’s all just as I planned it!”

“Still, it took you a lot of time to settle on the overall concept,” she commented.

“Mm.”

“Back in April, you said that you wanted to renovate the entrance, but it took you until the end of May to finish the proposal,” she pointed out. “And you only completed it here, at the end of July. You kept us waiting for quite a long time.”

“I... I was busy with other things!” Seiya said defensively.

“You should really have left the task to someone else,” Isuzu told him. “Isn’t your job to worry about the park as a whole?”

“For important things like these, I should be in charge. I’ve told you that many times.”

“Yes. And I’ve argued against it many times.”

“Mm.”

For some reason, Isuzu was extremely strict when it came to things like this. Perhaps, as his secretary, she didn’t like him taking time away from administration to do an art director’s job.

“But...” Isuzu hesitated for a moment, then continued. “I do think it’s a wonderful design. Almost professional. Where did you learn to do this kind of thing?”

“Heh. The library,” Seiya admitted. “I read several books about it. And I

already knew the basics, so things went quite smoothly.”

Isuzu’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Of course. I know, to accomplish such a masterpiece after reading a few books... my genius terrifies even me.”

“You would be perfect if you didn’t brag like this,” she told him.

“What choice do I have? I really am that amazing! Bwahahaha!” he cackled. Seiya was feeling a bit inflated by the guests’ positive reception, but Isuzu didn’t share in his laughter.

“Yes. You truly are amazing,” she whispered. Isuzu didn’t sound impressed; there was something sorrowful and guilty in her tone, a sigh lingering around the corners of her words.

“Why can’t you just be happy?” he asked, sounding exasperated. “The renovation’s going great. Stop being so suspicious.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” Isuzu admitted.

“What, do you have a problem with it?”

“No, I don’t... but...”

“.....” Seiya couldn’t imagine what Isuzu was thinking. Was she worried? Concerned? Regretful? He didn’t even know what she thought of him.

He probably should have just let it go, but in that moment, Seiya wanted to know what she was feeling. He focused on Isuzu’s melancholy profile. He wasn’t really trying to use his magic— he’d heard that the magic Latifah had given him, the ability to read minds, could only be used once per person. He’d read Isuzu’s mind already, the day after he’d gotten the magic, so he couldn’t use it on her again. Or so he thought. But...

«...Of course I don’t have a problem with it. But I rely on him all the time... and I’m ashamed of myself. I wish I could be more help to him...» Seiya heard her thoughts.

“...Seiya-kun?” she asked him, looking puzzled. He just stared at her, too shocked for words. “What’s the matter?” she prompted further.

“Mm? Ah... well...” he stammered, trying to keep up appearances. Seiya couldn’t figure out what had just happened. He had definitely read her mind with his magic. He’d used it countless of times before, on a variety of people, after all— he knew just what it felt like. Yes, it definitely wasn’t his imagination... But wasn’t the magic one use per person?

She peered a bit closer at him, looking more confused than concerned. “Are you feeling ill?”

“No. I’m just... fine.” *It must be a mistake*, he thought. He gazed at her and used his magic once more, this time, more consciously.

«...I wonder what’s wrong. He was in full-steam arrogance mode a minute ago. Now, suddenly he seems despondent... He really must be tired from working so hard every day. I’m worried...»

“.....!” There was no question that time; his magic had worked. He’d been told he could only use it once on each person, but that no longer appeared to be the case, as he’d just used it a second and a third time on Isuzu. Could the limitations have simply come from his initial lack of experience with magic? Of course, the only reason he’d assumed it was one use per person was because that was what she had told him, based on precedent.

Seiya waffled on whether he should tell her about it immediately or not. What would Isuzu think if she found out that he could use his mind-reading magic more than once? It would put her on her guard, wouldn’t it? Of course it would, and he didn’t want that. It would be a lie to say that selfish thoughts didn’t still linger in a corner of his mind— the desire to know what she really thought of him, for example. Besides, he was still confused about the situation, and he wanted some time to work out his feelings.

“Ah, ahem.” Seiya cleared his throat and forced a cheerful expression onto his face. “Nothing, it’s nothing. ...At any rate, the renovation was clearly a success, so just calm down and follow my lead. All right?”

“...Really?” Isuzu asked.

“Yes! Listen to me, er... Er...” With a jolt, Seiya realized it. The girl in front of him— This girl with the ponytail, dressed in the red sleeveless royal guard uniform that hugged her curves. The girl he knew so well, who had supported

him as his secretary for so many months... He knew so many things about her, and yet... he couldn't remember her name.

He remembered all kinds of things they'd done together. He even remembered the sight of her bare butt when he'd accidentally caught her changing early on in their relationship. He remembered all the times they'd butted heads trying to save the park since then. And yet... for some reason, despite her importance to him, her name escaped him. This wasn't just a momentary lapse; he genuinely didn't know her name.

And it wasn't just her name; there was another memory he was missing. He remembered that the time he caught her changing was shortly after they'd first met, but he couldn't remember how the first meeting had happened. He was sure it must have had a lot of impact, but... It was in a classroom, right? And then there was a date... no, what was it? He didn't know.

What he did know was that there were two things he couldn't remember—that he'd forgotten—about her. Two. Exactly the number of times he'd used his magic on her just now.

"Seiya-kun?" Isuzu said. "Are you all right?"

"Y-Yeah..." As he answered, he felt disoriented. He even remembered the context in which she had first called him Seiya-kun, yet he couldn't remember her name or how they had met. "Just a minute..." he told her.

Seiya took out his phone and checked his email. She was his secretary, after all, and they corresponded daily, so it came up right away. Sento Isuzu: that was her name. But he felt no sense of recognition from seeing those words on the screen. It was more like... *I see. So it's Sento Isuzu, is it?* He wasn't recalling the name; he was learning brand new information.

So when he said her name, the words hung unnaturally on his lips: "I'm fine, Sento Isuzu. I'm... I'm just fine. So don't look at me like that..." Seiya repeated, trying to force down his own anxieties. "...Sento Isuzu."

".....? You're acting very strangely," she commented. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Sento..." he trailed off.

“.....?” Isuzu waited for him to continue.

“...Nothing. I’m just feeling a little light-headed.” Seiya turned away from her and walked up to the window. The glass was both polarized and smoked, so the guests below couldn’t see him.



“Seiya-kun. Maybe you should take some time to—” Just then, Isuzu’s smartphone rang. “It’s Tricen.”

“Ahh. Go on,” he told her, “answer it.”

She did so. The call was from their head of administration, Tricen; he’d been head of PR before, but recently they’d promoted him to head of administration. His duties hadn’t changed in practice, but this job title seemed to fit him better. It was true that what he did was more like admin than PR. Seiya was hoping to find someone to be the new PR chief so he could reduce Tricen’s burden soon.

“He wants us to come to the parking lot,” Sento Isuzu said after a short phone conversation.

“The parking lot?” Seiya questioned.

“We have a visitor,” she answered. “From the sky.”

When Sento Isuzu had said “from the sky,” Seiya had assumed it was a dragon from a magical realm, like Rubrum, or something similar.

But they were actually arriving in a helicopter. It was a Bell 429; a kind of business helicopter that went for 500 or 600 million yen apiece. It had a showy flower pattern, punctuated by a picture of a mouse mascot near the door.

It wasn’t a mouse like Moffle, though. It was three heads tall, done up in white, red, and blue, with spindly arms and legs like pipe cleaners. One of his large eyes was winking, and he was smiling the most cheerful smile in the world. Yes, it was a champion smile— This was the headliner mascot of Digimalland, Mackey Brown.

There was no one on the planet who didn’t know Mackey’s name. He was the world’s greatest mascot. He was also the wealthiest resident of any magical realm, raking in billions of dollars per year. He had luxurious mansions all around the world and hopped from country to country on a private jet. It was said that his personal assets rivaled those of Bill Gates. He’d even been interviewed by *Forbes* multiple times.

The turboshaft engine of Mackey's private business helicopter roared as it set down in AmaBri's parking lot.

"Is... Is Mackey on that thing?"

"What?!"

"Mackey! He's on that thing, right?!"

"I can't hear you!"

Seiya and Isuzu shouted to each other. The booming engine and rushing air currents made it impossible to have a conversation.

This wasn't a heliport; it was an employee parking lot. Was it even legal to land a helicopter in a place like this? Didn't it violate air traffic laws?

The helicopter touched down neatly. The door opened, and Tricen got out first. His expression was stiff with anxiety.

The helicopter's engine must have shut off, as the turbine sound died down immediately. Soon, it was quiet enough to have a proper conversation.

"K-Kanie-san!!"

"Tricen," Seiya greeted his employee. "What's going on here?"

"I'm sorry. I was at a TV station in the city—you know, about the late night commercial? I'd gone to take care of arrangements but..." Tricen spoke, wiping sweat off his brow.

"And?"

"And... I ran into *him* in the hallway. He said he wanted a look at AmaBri... I, the unworthy Tricen, told him that it would be difficult to arrange without an appointment, but..."

"Hey, there! I'll explain the rest myself! Haha!" said a high-pitched voice. The great star of Digimalland, Mackey Brown, stepped out of the helicopter. He had a body in the colors of the French flag, and a smile that radiated (perhaps excessive) charm.

He looked just like the picture on the door. And that presence! He was bursting with the vitality of life! This was the air of a superstar! Like Muffle and

the others, he was clearly a “real fairy.”

“Ladiiies aaand gentlemeeen! Haha! Thanks for comin’ out to see me today! Haha!” Mackey proclaimed. He spun around and snapped his fingers.

Seiya heard the sound of applause echoing from all around them, as paper confetti and ticker tape fell. *This must be Mackey’s magic in action*, he thought.

“Well hey, I see a pretty girl!” Mackey immediately homed in on Isuzu, produced a red rose and offered it to her.

“Th-Thank you...” she stammered.

“Haha! Just my way of sayin’ hello!” Mackey told her. “Now listen up, fellas! It’s time for that famous song, *I Feel Good*! Hit it!”

Before anyone could object, a funky melody began to play:

Waaaaaoh!

I feel good! (Pa-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra)

I knew that I would (Pa-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra)

I feel good! (Pa-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra)

I knew that I would (Pa-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra-ra)

So good! (Cha, cha!)

So good! (Cha, cha!)

I got you! (Cha, cha, cha, cha!)

Waaaaaoh!

There was a brass and drum stinger, and then the music stopped. The applause rang out again. Mackey stood among multicolored spotlights with a disco ball glimmering over his head.

He was also surrounded by dancers who had appeared out of nowhere. They were standing in a parking lot in broad daylight, yet somehow, the whole place had been transformed into a stage for Mackey. Was this also Mackey’s magic at work?

“...Whew! Not bad, if I do say so myself! Thanks for listenin’!” Mackey gave them a sweeping bow, while Seiya and Isuzu just stood there, dumbfounded. At some point, the dancers and the disco ball had disappeared. “Haha! You must be Kanie Seiya, huh? I’ve heard all about ya!”

“Ah. I’m flattered...”

“I was appearin’ as a guest at the station today! It was a pretty typical variety show segment! It was all boring and the other entertainers were waaay too casual with me, but what can ya do! Keepin’ your name out there is important, even for a big star like me! Plus I got the anchor with the big rack to agree to dinner with me!” Mackey winked. “Haha!”

“More of this...” Seiya found himself muttering as he slumped over. *Why is everyone I meet like this?* he wondered with irritation. *What kind of places are those magical realms?!*

“By the way, I was filmin’ in studio two! It’s got that old-fashioned air conditioner and gets real hot this time of year! I bet you remember that, huh, Kanie-kun? Haha!”

“Yes. Well... erm... so studio two is still like that, is it?” He’d been in that studio a lot as a child actor. It would be easy for a man with Mackey’s connections to find that out with a little digging.

Seiya found himself feeling a little nostalgic about it all. But the moment after the thought left his lips, he realized Isuzu and Tricen were looking at him, and he snapped back to attention. *Oh, no! I thought I hated talking about my child star days... The mouse’s damned charisma caught me off guard!* he realized. *That ability to infiltrate a person’s mind like this... Mackey is indeed formidable. The world’s most popular man is formidable!*

Ignoring Seiya’s fear and alarm (if he’d even noticed it), Mackey continued. “So after I got out, I ran into this guy in the hall! Um, your name was... Um... er...”

“Ah! I am AmaBri’s head of administration, Tricen!” Tricen responded, rubbing his hands together.

Mackey clapped and pointed at Tricen. “Yeah, what you just said! And I was like, wow, how often do ya see someone from Rexland in a Japanese TV station? So I said, ‘hey!’”

“Hahh... I was forced to hunch over from the thrill!” Tricen gushed. “I’ll be telling this story all my life!” Rexland was Tricen’s home country— As the name

suggested, it was a land of dinosaurs. Apparently the people born there were particularly popular in America.

“Then I asked him why he was here, and wow! It turned out he worked at AmaBri! And suddenly I thought, I oughta have a look at the place! Haha! So I dragged him onto my helicopter and we flew on down! Haha!”

“Ah... excuse me for a moment.” Seiya said cautiously, preserving his formal speech as he prepared to ask his next question. He hated having this fishy rat parking his helicopter on his turf, but he was still a top star; he had to pay him his due respect. Besides, someone with Mackey’s means could have his whole park torn down on a whim. “Mackey-san,” he continued, “I know a great deal about you as well. You’re by far the most talented person in our industry.”

“Yeah! Wow, you know your stuff! Haha! I’m honored!”

“But... why visit a nothing park like ours? Surely we’re far beneath your notice...”

“Aw, c’mon!” Mackey twisted that big mouth of his into an abashed smile. Seiya had seen a lot of superstars in a lot of media in his time, but he’d never seen an expression like that. “You were s’posed to close up this March, but you managed to pull through! It even caught *me* by surprise, so I wanna know your secret! Haha!”

“Well... We got lucky, that’s all,” Seiya told him.

“Haha! What’s that, humility?”

“No, it’s the truth.” It was indeed; Seiya truly believed that they’d only made it this far because of luck. Despite his frequent expressions of arrogance, that was one thing he couldn’t deny. They’d had any number of close shaves up to now. If the cards had fallen just a little bit differently, the park would be an abandoned ruin by now. (Although he could take solace in knowing that if some ordinary fool had been here in his place, they’d have been dead before they even came to the table!)

“Haha! What an interesting choice of words! Though I don’t think you really mean ‘em!”

“Ah,” Seiya replied delicately.

“By the way, where’s that headliner of yours?”

“Er... are you referring to Moffle?”

“I sure am! Haha!” Mackey spread his arms wide. “What, ya didn’t know? I’m Moffle’s best friend! Of course, I’ve got 100 best friends all around the world! He’s the only best friend who makes less than \$30,000 a year, though! Haha!”

“Mackey. What do you want, fumo?”

Seiya heard the new voice, turned, and saw that Moffle had just arrived in the parking lot. He must have heard the commotion over the helicopter and come running. He didn’t look at all like a man happy to see an old friend, though.

“Hey, General Moffle! I missed ya! Haha!”

“I didn’t miss you, fumo.”

“Aw shucks, don’t be that way! I send you a Christmas card every year! But since ya never reply, I thought I’d better come by personally! Haha!” Mackey’s disposition remained sunny and cheerful.

Moffle clicked his tongue in annoyance. “Moffu. Darn it... Hey, Tricen.”

“Y-Yes?!”

“Show that fatcat rat whatever he wants to see, fumo. I need to talk to Seiya.”

“Y-Yes sir!”

“He’s got a powerful Lalapatch Charm (Celebrity Version), so it should be fine to let him onstage. But send Isuzu with him just to be safe, fumo.”

Isuzu’s brow furrowed at Moffle’s comment. “...? But I...”

“Haha! Sounds great to me! I love me some big-tiddy girls! How about it, Miss Secretary? Wanna spend the night with me? Oh, but don’t tell Munnie!” Munnie was Mackey’s official girlfriend. In reality, they were married; nobody knew about his other relationships. It was a sensitive enough subject that even the Western paparazzi refrained from prying.

Still feeling slightly dazed, Isuzu bowed courteously. “Allow me to show you around, Lord Mackey. Although I’ll pass on spending the night...”

“Aw, too bad. Haha! But that’s life! Let’s go!”

“All right. Right this way...”

“See you later, Moffle, Kanie-kun! Haha!”

Tricen, Isuzu, and several black-clad bodyguards led Mackey onstage.

“Best friend? What a crock, fumo.” Moffle spat as they were en route from the parking lot to the general affairs building.

“What was he talking about?”

“It’s from when I was part of the Maple Land special forces, fumo. Before my promotion to general.”

Seiya had heard the story of Moffle being a general in the magical realm of Maple Land, and that he’d been a captain in their special forces before then. That must be the time period they were talking about.

“...There was a terrorist attack, see, fumo. A group of Communist radicals opposed to the Maple Land monarchy—”

“You guys have radicals?” Seiya interrupted.

“Moffu (affirmative). So these radicals occupied the USD embassy, fumo.”

“The USD” referred to the United States of Digima, the magical realm from which most of the Digimalead cast, including Mackey, hailed. Perhaps the term “magical superpower” was more appropriate; Maple Land was a large realm in its own right, but it was dwarfed by the USD in terms of power and influence.

“The radicals had holed up inside with hostages... my squad was sent to neutralize the situation, fumo. It was a tough operation, but we managed to rescue the civilians and beat up all the terrorists, fumo.”

“Hmm...” Seiya was curious about the “beat up” part, but inquiring would probably derail the story, so he decided against it.

“The operation was a success,” Moffle went on. “But then the Maple Land State Department stuck its nose in, fumo. ‘Say it was a joint operation with the Digimans,’ they said. But what they meant was, give them all the credit, fumo.”

“Credit, huh?”

“That meant Mackey got declared a big damn hero, fumo.” He explained how

Mackey had had a long career in the military as a first reservist, serving as a bomber pilot in hostile territory long ago... The long and short of it was that, for political reasons, Moffle and the others were swept under the rug, and the official story pushed that it was Mackey who had saved the day. Maple Land was also blamed for failing to stop the radicals in the first place, and was forced to concede to several of the USD's demands. "He didn't even do much of anything, but the king even gave him a knighthood, fumo. ...And ever since, he's acted like we're 'best friends.' It's not as if I wanted credit, so I don't exactly hold a grudge, fumo. I just don't like the man, fumo."

"I see," Seiya commented. "But it didn't look to me like there was any real animus there." Moffle had clearly been annoyed earlier, but not quite to the point of hate— It looked more like Mackey got under his skin than anything.

"Moffu. Well, you know..." Moffle sighed. "He's shallow and annoying, but there's one thing I can say about Mackey, fumo."

"What is it?"

"He's a first-class entertainer, fumo."

After touring the park for about an hour, Mackey Brown arrived in the rooftop garden of Maple Castle. It was rare to host visitors in the rooftop garden, but taking him to the dreary meeting room in the general affairs building didn't seem right. Besides, their manager, Latifah, had said she wanted to offer her regards. While helping Latifah rush through the preparation of tea cakes, Seiya checked the work SNS and found that the park's cast was beside itself:

《It's Mackey! It's really Mackey!》

《Mackey talked to me! He said "keep up the good work"!》

《I thought he'd be a real jerk... but he was actually really nice.》

《Mackey shook my hand! I'll never wash it again!》

《This is a great sign, pii! I bet he's here for secret talks with Moffle!》

《I got a picture with him, but I guess I'd get in trouble if I shared it on Twitter, huh?》

Pathetic! Look at them, losing their heads over a business rival! Seiya thought. (Though actually, their park was so insignificant the term “rival” didn’t quite seem fitting.) To Salama’s final message, he replied, “No, don’t tweet about this. Don’t tell anyone, either.” While he did that, Mackey knelt reverently in front of Latifah and kissed her hand lightly. The gesture seemed smooth and practiced.

“I cannot thank you enough for coming, Lord Mackey. Though I can offer little in the way of hospitality, I invite you to make yourself at home,” Latifah said amicably. Of course, as the first princess of a magical realm, she showed no signs of nervousness or intimidation. Even in the presence of the world’s biggest star, her comportment was immaculate.

“Gosh, Your Highness! I’m honored! Haha!”

“Is your wife well? I am told that she sends me a Christmas card every year. I am grateful for the consideration.”

“Haha! She sure does! Munnie’d love to come see you, Your Highness! Plus... wowee, you’re pretty! We got a lot of cast members who play princesses in our park, but they sure can’t stack up to you!”

“Oh, you flatter me,” Latifah giggled.

“‘Why, she is a pearl, whose price hath launch’d above a thousand ships, and turned crown’d kings to merchants...’ That’s from Shakespeare! Haha!”

“I had never heard that before, Lord Mackey. How knowledgeable you are.”

“Aw, it’s nothin’! Haha! Haha!”

Moffle, standing on the sidelines, clicked his tongue. “Oh, please. Shakespeare my eye...” he grumbled, among other things.

Tea with Latifah commenced. Mackey never seemed to stop talking— He complimented the flowers, and spoke eloquently about the tea. Most importantly, he never forgot to inject bits of humor here and there. Even Seiya was astonished by Mackey’s conversational skills.

As the ones who had shown Mackey around, Isuzu and Tricen had joined

them. Tricen seemed dazzled by the superstar, and even Isuzu seemed much less defensive than she'd been at the start. She didn't seem to like him, exactly, but her words and gestures now indicated respect.

"Now, if I may..." Once the ice had been thoroughly broken, Latifah picked herself up. "I really must be going. There are many things to which I must attend."

"Oh, gosh! You probably should!" Mackey agreed. "Sorry to drop by all unannounced!"

"Not at all. You are always welcome here... Next time you come, you really must bring your wife."

"Haha! You bet I will!"

Latifah smiled radiantly. Just before she turned to leave, she said, "Kanie-sama, do handle the rest."

"R-Right..." he agreed nervously.

"And Tricen-san. Might I ask you to join me?"

"Ah? Yes, of course! I shall hunch over in providing you aid!" Tricen rushed to his feet and left the rooftop garden with Latifah.

"Haha. Aw..." Once the first princess of Maple Land was out of their sight, Mackey put a hand to his chest with an enraptured sigh. "She sure is the best! I think so every time I meet her! That elegance, that grace! She's like a flower bloomin' on the lakeside, I tell ya!"

Seiya's brow furrowed at the mention of multiple meetings. "You've met her before?"

"Haha! Sure I have! A buncha times!"

"Moffu. He drops by unannounced every so often, fumo. He knows about Latifah's curse too, fumo."

Does he, now? Seiya wondered.

While Seiya sat there in shock, Mackey gave him a sidelong glance and let out a gloomy sigh. "It's one sad story, huh? If not for that curse, she'd be a beautiful

lady by now! Haha!”

“So what, fumo? She’d still be out of your league, fumo.”

“Haha! Just kidding, just kidding! After all... ya can’t go through life without humor!”

“Moffu...” Moffle slumped over.

But Mackey didn’t seem inclined to joke about the subject anymore (the restraint was another sign of a keen mind), and said, “She’s not just beautiful, but considerate, too! The way she took the dinosaur guy and left at just the right time... perfect! Bravo! Digimalland ladies don’t have that kind of grace! Haha!”

“Yeah...” Seiya had noticed that, too. Mackey hadn’t come to AmaBri to shoot the breeze; he had something he wanted to talk to Seiya or Moffle about. Latifah must have sensed that, too, which was why she had bowed out and taken Tricen with her. She had probably sensed that it was something he was hesitant to say in front of them, even. “That consideration of hers has been a great asset.”

“I’ll bet, haha!”

Just then, Moffle started tapping his paw on the marble table, wearing his annoyance openly. “Moffu. Then let’s drop the formalities and get to brass tacks, fumo. You wouldn’t have come to AmaBri if you didn’t want something.”

“Aw, don’t be like that! Like I told Kanie-kun earlier, I care about how this park turns out! Haha!”

“That’s not true and you know it, fumo. Parks like ours are a dime a dozen to you.”

“Haha! But lookin’ at this dime-a-dozen park sure cheers me up a lot! It makes me feel better, remembering there’s a bottom to our barrel, ya know?”

“.....”

“I mean, c’mon! I’m the best in the world! You know how much pressure there is, staying at the top all the time? It gets pretty lonely, ya know? It’d crush most fairies! Sometimes I start to lose faith in our attractions, and I tell myself,

‘C’mon, Mackey! Look at AmaBri! Compared to that lousy amusement park, you’re doin’ just fine!’ That lets me build up my courage again! I can work hard and endure my wife’s splurging, too!”

“I... I see, fumo...”

“I’ve tried thousand-dollar-an-hour psychotherapists, medicines from neurologists, and all kinds of things! But none of it works quite as well as that! AmaBri is my panacea! Haha!”

For some reason, Seiya couldn’t muster up any rage about this; the thought of the pressures of being the world’s best sent a strange chill through him. “...Also, Mackey sees a psychotherapist?” he whispered to Isuzu.

“Everyone in the business knows about it,” she whispered back. “And about his wife’s splurging, too.”

“It does sound pretty bad...”

Ignoring their whispered conversation, Mackey continued on with exaggerated gestures. “...But right now, I’ve gotta say, I’m real disappointed in AmaBri! Haha!”

“...?” they waited for him to explain.

“You’ve gotten way too good!” Mackey exclaimed. “Especially that renovated entrance! Things’re on an upward curve, and that’s not the AmaBri I know!”

“I’m not sure what to say to that...”

“I just sure did love the old park’s seediness! And now you’ve got all this thought put into the guests’ sight lines and walking lines and sounds and smells! Just who’d you hire to come up with all that?”

“Funds were limited, so I did it myself,” Seiya told him.

Mackey’s eyes went wide and he blinked. “Yourself, huh?! Haha! What a shock! Kanie Seiya-kun, I’m ready to hire you at Digimaland, for my sake and yours! You can start at three million dollars a year!”

“Three...?! Er... well...” Three million dollars! Close to 400 million yen! Of course, he couldn’t possibly accept, but his mind was so blown that it took him a moment before he could respond. “I’m sorry, I appreciate the offer... But I’m

not doing this for money...”

“Haha! I thought ya’d say that! How about five million? You’re worth at least that much! Haha!”

“Seriously, it’s not about the money...”

“Moffu! That’s enough, fumo!” Moffle released his pent-up anger. “Trying to buy Seiya out while we’re sitting right here? It’s that arrogance, that depravity that I—“

“Haha! Haha! Haha! Now, now, Moffle, it’s just a little capitalism! Hooray for capitalism!” Mackey did a spin and then posed. Confetti and ticker tape went flying, and applause seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. “Hey, let’s have a song! What’s a good one for a moment like this? I know, my favorite song! *Let’s Have Fun at Digimaland!* Hit it, guys!”

A funky brass melody began to play. Dancers appeared, moving in time with the rhythm.

*Great attractions from wall to wall!
You can get there from everywhere!
Fly across the land with all your luggage in tow!
Get on a cart and you can go anywhere!
How’s that feel?
Even without a destination, no matter how far...
You can come here and you can find your real self!*

()Let’s have fun at Digimaland!
Whether far away or right around the corner!
Let’s have fun at Digimaland!
We can hold hands all across the world!
Let’s have fun at Digimaland!
Come here and find blessings from heaven!
Are you looking for the promised land?
Because this is where you’ll find it!
In this place that feels like home!*

*New Tomorrow! (New Tomorrow!)
Toon City! (Toon City!)*

Coo-ritter! (Coo-ritter!)
Western PA! (Western PA!)
Fantasy City! (Fantasy City!)
Aschenputtel! Adventure! Bazaar! And CA!
Wow!
Let's have fun at Digimalland!
Hit me! (HIT ME!)

*(*Repeat)*

Let's have fun at Digimalland!
Wow!
Feels so good!

There was another round of applause and cheers. Mackey flashed a thumbs up and a saucy wink.

While this was all going on, Seiya and Moffle tried to make comments like, “No, you don’t have to sing. Let’s keep talking,” but something was stopping them. No matter how hard they thought the words, they couldn’t manage to speak them aloud.

“Is that part of Mackey’s magic, too?” Seiya whispered.

“Yeah, fumo. It’s a spell called ‘Unstoppable Musical’... Once he starts singing, no one can stop him, fumo...”

“Sounds like a massive pain in the ass...”

Ignoring their whispered conversation once again, Mackey spun his microphone around and stuck it in his pocket, still on a post-performance high. “Whew! Haha! Well, how’d you like that?”

“Not a bit, fumo. ...Anyway, er... what were we talking about again?”

“Oh, I remember! Capitalism! If I offer enough money, Kanie-kun’s as good as mine! Haha! That’s what I was tryin’ to say, you know?”

“I turned you down, though...”

“And that’s a foolish decision! Haha!” Mackey folded his arms and peered into Seiya’s face. “I mean, I know there’s no way you guys’ll hit three million guests!

I can see the future! Haha!” The moment he said that, Seiya and Isuzu went pale.

“Three million people? ...What are you talking about, fumo?” Moffle looked at him dubiously.

Three million was the number of people AmaBri had to bring in this year. Last year, the quota had been 600,000, and they’d just barely managed to clear that. But starting this year, three million was their goal— It was a number they’d had to agree to so that they could sell the second park grounds earlier in the year. The threat was the same as the year before: If they didn’t reach three million, AmaBri would be shut down.

Three million was a lot. AmaBri was doing its best; if they kept up this pace, they might just reach two million. But three was a pipe dream— an unthinkable number. That’s why Seiya had been keeping it a secret from most of the cast; He knew that hearing it would just demotivate them, and he couldn’t afford to have morale tanking now.

The only ones who knew about the situation were Seiya and Isuzu, Tricen (who had been present for the negotiations), and their head of accounting, Ashe. He hadn’t told Moffle; he’d planned to do it at some point, but simply hadn’t gotten around to it yet.

Moffle’s shock was understandable. “Seiya. What’s he talking about, fumo? Three million people?”

“I’ll explain later.”

“...Moffu.” He must have grasped the seriousness of the situation, because rather than pressing further, Moffle fell silent and watched the conversation unfold.

Seiya stared straight into his face of Mackey, who had been guffawing through the entire exchange. “Mackey-san. Could I ask how you knew about that?” There was no point in denying it; knowing Mackey, he had his ways of finding these things out.

“Haha! C’mon now, it’s everywhere! Ya sold the second park, remember? And ya sold it to Malmart! Everyone was gonna be wondering about it!”

Malmart was the world-renowned superstore that had bought AmaBri's second park, so that they could erect a large shopping mall on the land. He'd told the AmaBri cast about that part— that several years down the line, they'd have a shopping mall opening up in their backyard. This would likely lead to a major increase in AmaBri's attendance due to a symbiotic effect, and the thought gave the cast hope for a bright future ahead.

"I can see how you would know about Malmart..." Seiya concluded. "But how did you know about the three million quota?"

"Oh, plenty of ways! You know the saying, use a thief to catch a thief! Haha!"

"....."

"Don't get me wrong, Kanie-kun! Haha! I didn't come here to tease you or nothin'!"

"I don't know, I have my doubts about that..." Seiya decided to drop the formality; fawning politeness wasn't going to change the man's attitude. Besides, he wasn't quite sure if Mackey was on his side or not.

"Okay! Then I'll put it all on the table!" Mackey clapped his hands together. "Who forced the outrageous three million attendance goal on you during the Malmart negotiations?"

"Amagi Development," Seiya answered shortly.

Amagi Development was a third sector company, built on investment from Amagi City and several other companies. One would expect them to be on the park's side, but they were hostile to AmaBri at the moment, and causing trouble for Seiya at every turn.

"Sure! But hold on a minute! Wouldn't they profit off of AmaBri selling the second park, too?" Mackey asked. "Having that big shopping mall open up would be great for the city and their partners! It's a sweet deal! There's no way Amagi Development'd be against it!"

"True."

"So why would they tack that unreachable goal on the sale? Haha! It's pretty weird, don't ya think?"

“That’s true. It is strange.” Of course, that had occurred to Seiya as well. It made no sense for them to go to such lengths just to shoot themselves in the foot over a simple grudge.

“The answer is... because there’s a conspiracy! It’s another big company at the heart of this, not Amagi Development!”

“A request by Malmart?” Seiya guessed.

“Haha! Close, but no cigar! Malmart’s neutral in the whole thing! They just want as popular an amusement park next to their new shopping mall as they can get! It’s not Malmart that would encourage Amagi Development on to ask for that unreasonable three million demand. It’s...”

“Moffu. I think I get you, fumo. Cosmic Group, right?”

“Haha! You said it, Lord Moffle!” Mackey pointed at Moffle and whispered “Bingo!” softly.

Cosmic Group was a massive entertainment conglomerate. They were involved in movies, video games, streaming video, and music. With a finger in every pie in the entertainment industry, they were the only entity that could truly be called a rival to Digimaland. The Kansai theme park Cosmic Studios was world famous, and they’d also been duking it out with rival theme parks in Florida, originally Digimaland’s home turf.

“Cosmic Group is lookin’ to open a park in Tokyo! They’re schemin’ to siphon guests off from my... my very own Tokyo Digimaland! Haha!”

“I see...” Seiya frowned. It was true that AmaBri’s location was good. One could call it ideal, even; the park was less than an hour by train from Shinjuku, and only 15 minutes off the highway. It was on a large plot of land, about the same size as Mackey’s Digimaland, and surrounded by undeveloped hills, which meant no trouble from the local residents. Someone with enough funds could easily overhaul the content and produce a new theme park there— in other words, tear AmaBri down and build a Tokyo Cosmic Studios. “That would be a threat even to you, I guess?” he asked.

“Haha! Well, I wouldn’t go that far! My park’s ready to take on all comers!” Mackey laughed. Was it a real laugh or a feigned one? Seiya couldn’t tell. “It just

really gets under my skin, thinkin' they'd crush the lousy theme park that got me through my toughest times! That's why I came here to tell you about it!"

"We appreciate it," Seiya thanked him smoothly.

"Haha! Now, a proposal! I'm gonna solve your attendance problem!"

"...How?"

"I'm gonna let you guys join my Digima Group!"

Seiya, Moffle, and Isuzu all went silent.

"We'll add our intellectual property to your attractions! *Figure Story! Trains! Fighting Ammo!*"

".....!" The others sat there in shock. Those were all world-famous animated movies, and Mackey was saying he would let AmaBri run attractions based around them.

"And I'll license you limited-time merch exclusives! Haha! How about... a plush doll of me cosplaying Lord Moffle! Boy, do the diehards get worked up for that stuff! My fans'll flock to AmaBri then, for sure!"

"Urgh..."

The roar of a turboshaft engine drew nearer. Mackey's helicopter was descending on the rooftop garden.

"Of course... haha. If you join us, you'll have to start doing things our way... In a lot of ways. Yessir, in a whole lot of ways." Mackey's expression was still cheerful, but his tone was far from friendly.

The downwind from the rotor blades pounded hard on the flowers that Latifah had worked so hard to raise.

"Of course, that'll all come out in negotiations! But I'd say it's a good deal for both of us! Haha! Get back to me when ya can! See ya later!" The hovering helicopter lowered a rope ladder. Mackey jumped onto it like it was the easiest thing in the world and flew away, waving to Seiya and the others. "G'bye for now! I gotta get to dinner with that anchor with the nice rack! Haha! Think about my offer, okay? Until then... byeeeee!"

The helicopter gained altitude and flew off to the horizon. Mackey the Rat had left the park like a character in a phantom thief anime— it was hard to argue that it wasn't the coolest departure possible.

The second Mackey was gone, Moffle laid into Seiya. "Three million? Three million, fumo?! What in the world, fumo?!"

Seiya and Moffle hadn't been coming to blows often lately; despite their natural enmity, they had established something of a bond of trust. Yet he still found himself grabbed by the lapels from time to time.

"I was going to tell you eventually," Seiya said. "But I thought that if I revealed it too soon, it would tank morale. Once the three million goal was in sight, I was going to explain—"

"It's not going to be in sight! It's never going to be in sight!" Moffle said, his voice cracking. "It's three million, fumo! Don't you realize how impossible that is, fumo?!"

"I do," Seiya said. Three million was a number achievable only by a select few amusement parks in Japan. Mackey's Digimaland was one; Cosmic Studios, which was currently conspiring with Amagi Development, was another. Then there were two or three others— at most, five or six parks in total.

It wasn't all about popularity, either. Most parks just couldn't even accommodate that many people. Take, for instance, their recent problems with the wait times at Moffle's House of Sweets the other day—Japan's best amusement parks would have had facilities to accommodate all those people from the start. They were set up to accommodate 10,000 each day.

AmaBri wasn't like them. They had never been expected to bring in more than one million people per year at most, and their construction had reflected that, both in terms of facilities and the employee hierarchies. They were currently on track to bring in 1.5 million, and that alone already had them straining at the hinges. Guests fainting from heat stroke in lines were just one sign of that— soon, more problems were going to start popping up. Equipment breakdowns, cast exhaustion, facility shortages... The lines at the women's bathrooms were already getting to a point that couldn't be ignored.

Now they needed to bring in three million people? It was unthinkable that

they could get that many to come—and even if they did, they couldn't accommodate them. Moffle's fury was entirely natural.

"Why did you accept that condition, fumo?!" he fumed.

"We had no other choice," Isuzu answered in Seiya's place. "We had expected to sell the land to Malmart under the original contract. But the day of the final negotiation—the day we added Rubrum and Taramo to the team—Amagi Development suddenly changed their conditions. If we'd refused them... the deal to sell the second park would have fallen through."

"Moffu..."

"AmaBri would have folded within the next three months. Completing the sale meant more money from Maple Bank, which allowed us to make the renovations we needed. Seiya-kun's decision was correct, in my opinion." It was Isuzu's first time sharing her thoughts about the sale. Before now, even in front of Seiya, she had only expressed concern and anxiety. "Do you remember what he said at the start?" she continued. "When you're drowning, you can't be picky about what shore you wash up onto. Our park has managed to make landfall on an unfamiliar beach; no more."

"...Fine, fumo." His anger must have relented, because Moffle let Seiya go. "So, what's the plan, fumo?"

"About what?"

"You know what— Mackey's offer. If we join their group and get their support..."

"Right..." Seiya fell into thought. He had to admit it; Mackey's proposal had appeal. Given the situation AmaBri had found itself in, one could even call it a godsend. After all, Digima Group had massive capital, and their IP was some of the most valuable in the world. Joining them would immediately solve their money problems, and as for attracting visitors... if things went well, they could reach the three million they needed within the next six months. The things Mackey had been talking about before—tie-ins with popular movies, the sale of rare goods—those alone would be incredibly appealing to tourists. They'd probably also have ideas about how to accommodate the increased numbers. One could even say that AmaBri's survival depended on them accepting

Mackey's help.

"It might... be worth considering." Seiya chose his words carefully. One of many possibilities to review— a plan he wasn't immediately enamored with, but one worth considering.

But the other two still seemed unsettled.

"Mo—"

"Are you serious?" Moffle seemed to be about to say something, but Isuzu interrupted. "Don't you realize what that would lead to? You've been acting manager for five months, so you must realize that it means that AmaBri would stop being AmaBri."

"If you're worried about the park name, I can't imagine they'd care," Seiya said.

"No, it goes beyond that," Isuzu argued. "There's no reason to think Lord Mackey would be lenient if we join his group. We'll be forced to make many changes, including the park's name— We might, perhaps, be 'Amagi Digima Park.' Or something even worse."

"But why does that matter," Seiya frowned, "if it means the park survives?"

"It depends on what you think the park is," Isuzu's tone was barbed. "To begin with, there is one thing I can say for sure— If we join Digimaland, they will fire most of our cast. Tricen, Wanipii, Kodain, Mirai-kun... do you think Mackey will consider them vital personnel? Of course not. Muse and the others will be jeopardized, as well. They work hard, but there are better dancers out there. More professional ones, too."

Digimaland's dancers were some of the best in the world; some were even hired from Broadway. AmaBri's girls were clumsy and made mistakes. They were as charming as could be, but only on a "local celebrity" level. There was no way they could beat Mackey's hand-picked elites. Out of all of them, Sylphie might compete on dancing alone, but even then, there were tons of dancers on her level.

"Similarly, Macaron and Tiramii would be in trouble," Isuzu went on. "They're our headliner mascots, but they'd likely be expelled. Digimaland has strict

standards regarding its employees' histories." Macaron had a history of delinquency and divorce, and Tiramii was a criminal who'd done time. None of their mortal guests knew about these things, but Digimalland would still consider them disqualifying.

"Lord Muffle would likely be allowed to stay; his history is clean. But... they would likely put severe restrictions on his behavior," she said grimly. "He wouldn't be able to speak as freely with the guests, and he wouldn't be able to visit his usual bars, even with a Lalapatch Charm. He might even be forbidden to interact with the rest of the cast."

"You're kidding..." It did indeed feel unreasonable, and Seiya found himself grimacing. He knew they would want to run a tighter ship, but he wasn't expecting it to be that bad.

"Isuzu's right, fumo," Muffle said. "Digimalland's rules are just that strict. Of course, that's because they're the best in the world— Most of us wouldn't measure up, anyway."

"But—"

"It's the truth, fumo." Muffle said sternly. "Let's be honest, fumo. They're the major leagues, and we're high school ball... Well maybe not quite that bad, but it's something like that, fumo. If I tried to get hired at Digimalland tomorrow... I might not even reach the lowest rung of their ladder."

"Hmm..." Seiya pondered this information.

"And that's to say nothing of Macaron and the others..." Isuzu trailed off. "You can imagine what would happen to them, can't you?"

Isuzu was right. Seiya knew that Digimalland's cast were popular and renowned, many on the level of Hollywood celebrities. Their mascots simply couldn't compete. Of course, they all had their regular customers, their own unique flavors of popularity— But it was all at a niche level. Popularity with enthusiasts didn't necessarily translate to the wider world.

"And there's more," Isuzu went on relentlessly. "We wouldn't be able to maintain our current management structure, either. They'll fill our departments with their own representatives and begin dictating things— from the content of

our shows to the menu in the employee cafeteria. They will even dictate with whom we can do business; we won't be able to work with the merchants who have treated us well in the past."

"Wait," Seiya interjected. "You and Moffle are talking like they'd do this out of spite. Digimaland is a large corporation; of course they're going to be a little strict."

"Yes, and I completely respect that," Isuzu agreed. "Those policies are what makes them the world's leading park. But they aren't right for AmaBri."

"We don't know that yet," Seiya argued. "We can negotiate to get more things on our terms."

"Unlikely, fumo. Their lawyers are first-rate, and they know we're desperate. They'll shake us down for all we're worth, fumo."

"I won't let it happen!" Seiya said sharply. "And anyway... I haven't decided to accept the offer yet. I'm just considering it."

"Seiya-kun..."

"Are you saying there's another way?! If I could think of one, I wouldn't—" Seiya began to speak, then stopped himself. *I wouldn't have to torture myself like this!* wasn't the kind of thing a leader should say. It was a good thing it was just Moffle and Isuzu here; if the others happened to overhear it, it would just spread anxiety.

"No... forget it." He took a deep breath. "Anyway... let's leave the question for another day. We still have today's meeting to get to..."

But Seiya couldn't bring himself to focus on the meeting, or his office work. He was having to keep Mackey's proposal a secret, not to mention his new discovery about his magic...

The cast were thrilled over the success of the renovated entrance, and they were apparently going to hold a drinking party that night. "Why don't you join us for once, Kanie-san?" Muse, the Spirit of Water and leader of Aquario, asked him. It was after work, by the bicycle rack near the general affairs building, and she was dressed in plain clothes. Muse was apparently the organizer for the

party tonight.

“No, I...”

“Aww. Take a little time off work with the gang, for once!” Muse coaxed. “I’d like to get to know you better, too.”

“Ah, I’m grateful for the sentiment, but... I have homework, and I need to finish it tonight.”

“I see... well, maybe next time.”

“Sorry.”

Muse gave him a bow, then took off running for the bus station.

“You’re not coming?” Isuzu asked him from behind. She must have been watching. She had changed into street clothes, too; she must be intending to join the drinking party. “You were lying about having homework. Muse didn’t believe you, either.”

Seiya hardly ever did school homework; he typically just finished it in class on the days he attended. Besides, summer vacation was coming up— There was no way he had any work he had to finish up by tomorrow.

“Probably not,” he agreed with a sigh. “...Look, I’m glad everyone else is having a good time, but they wouldn’t be able to complain about work if I were there.”

“...I suppose you’re right,” Isuzu admitted.

“I want them to be able to let off steam.” Besides, he wasn’t sure if he could face their smiling faces today.

“Then I won’t go, either.”

“Why not? I thought you always went to these things.”

“You deserve to let off steam, too. I found an excellent ramen shop the other day— Why don’t we go there together?”

Seiya was taken aback for a minute; Isuzu rarely invited him anywhere. “A ramen shop?” he ventured.

“Yes. It opened last month on Amagi Avenue. Its specialty is cucumber ramen:

Thick, rich tonkotsu soup with three whole cucumbers in it.”

Seiya balked at the image of a steaming bowl of broth with three cucumbers plopped next to the char siu. “Is that... good?” he asked cautiously.

“Yes. Very good.”

“I could imagine diced cucumbers, as an extension of hiyashi chuka, but... whole?”

“Yes,” she affirmed.

“And... three of them?”

“Yes. Doesn’t it sound amazing?”

“Not a bit.”

“...I see.” The light went out in Isuzu’s eyes and she slumped over, so Seiya had no choice but to agree to go to the ramen shop with her. It was rare for her to invite him anywhere outside of work, after all...

Riding together on his bike, it took them 15 minutes to get there. When they arrived, they saw the shop was closed. The “Notice of Closure” posted outside suggested it had remained open for merely a month.

Isuzu looked shaken. “This... this can’t be...”

“Well... it stands to reason,” Seiya said. “Cucumber ramen? It’s absurd.”

“The *world* is absurd, if it can’t appreciate that ramen.”

“I don’t understand your taste at all.”

They ended up going to the gyudon chain across the way, and ended the day there. Isuzu spent the whole time complaining about the ramen place, so they didn’t talk about much worthwhile— not even about Mackey’s visit.

Although, given how Seiya was feeling at the moment, that was actually a load off of his mind...

Suzuran Shopping Street, Dining Bar Gutami

“Mii! Okay so, so... I meet up with this MILF, and it’s crazy! She’s all inked up! Her back is tattoo-rama! She looks like Dominique from *Cobra*, mii! She could get together with her two sisters and gain the last weapon of ancient Martian culture!”

“Moffu... Not sure the youngsters’ll get that reference...”

“Who cares, mii? The point is, she’s a yakuza wife! A! Yakuza! Wife! No public baths or swimming pools for her, mii!”

“Oh-ho... that’s dedication. You don’t see much of that these days, eh, ron?”

“Hmm, *Yakuza Wives*, fumo... Those movies really were great. Especially... which one was it again? The one where Shima takes the submachine gun and rips through the bad yakuza? I loved seeing that beautiful woman in a kimono walking just like a member of the special forces, fumo. Her upper half didn’t move at all. It even shocked the former Hollywood Navy SEALs they had serving as advisors, fumo.”

“I’m more shocked to hear someone watched *Yakuza Wives* for that, ron...”

“Mii! Quit changing the subject, mii! I’m talking about this yakuza wife *I met*, mii!”

“...Ah, right, fumo. What then?”

“So we get to her apartment, mii... We’re about to get down to our first real puff, and just then, her husband comes home, mii.”

“Oh? That’s a death sentence for sure, ron.”

“I make it to the closet, mii, but it was a close call.”

“So what happened then, fumo?”

“So the husband starts getting hot and heavy with her, mii. And would you believe... They were doing baby play, mii! When they get to his wife changing his nappy, I can’t hold it any longer and I start to crack up. So of course he immediately realizes I’m there, mii.”

“Hmm...”

“So I’ve got this yakuza guy furious with mii! I’m here groveling, and he’s

talking about breaking my fingers, mii!”

“With the diaper on?”

“Mii! With the diaper on! Otherwise buck naked, drool crust on his face... So he says, ‘You got anything to say to me?’ And so I... I... I know it’s suicide, but I just can’t help myself...”

“What did you do?”

“I say ‘I’m vewwy sowwy,’ mii!”

“Bwahahahaha!”

“Gyahahahaha!”

Moffle and Macaron fell over laughing.

Tiramii pumped his fist in the air. “Well, mii? Funny, huh mii?!”

“Puff! I just imagined it, fumo! Gahaha!”

“Damn... I can picture the whole room just freezing over, ron! Hee hee hee...”

“Well, since you laughed, that’ll be 500 yen apiece, mii. C’mon. Pay up, mii.”

“You got me there, fumo. Here, 500 yen.”

“You win this round, ron... here.” Muffle and Macaron each ponied up a 500 yen coin to Tiramii.

“A pleasure doing business with you, mii! ...Of course, Muse-chan didn’t take the bet, so she’s exempted, mii!”

“Thanks... hahaha.” Muse, who was at the same table and listening in, was forcing her laughter. They’d had a bet going: If you laughed at Tiramii’s story, you paid 500 yen; if you didn’t laugh, he’d give you 500 yen. Muse had opted out, but thinking back now, she could have gotten 500 yen from Tiramii if she’d taken the bet (not that she wanted it). She didn’t find the story funny at all, and it was a little crude for her liking.

Hmm... At another table not far away, her comrades from Aquario—Spirit of Fire Salama, Spirit of Earth Kobory, and Spirit of Wind Sylphie—were teasing a fellow member of the cast, Wanipii. They were joking about Wanipii’s ideas about women (specifically, his favorite idol singer), and Salama in particular was

needling him with comments like, “There’s no way she’s really like that”... To which Wanipii dug his hole deeper with such desperate rebuttals as: “But she is, pii! She’s... she’s a really good girl, pii!” Then they all laughed again. They seemed to be having so much fun. If only she could be at that table instead...

There were about forty people attending the drinking party that Muse had arranged. That was too many to fit in their usual room at yakitori bar Savage, so she’d made reservations at a nearby chain restaurant. But the drink ordering turned out to be overly complicated, and Mirai-kun had gone off-menu to order himself a bottle of wine... On top of that, the pirate Ironbeard had brought his fur seal retinue, which put them far over their reserved seating and had Muse in a panic over how to deal with it. Fortunately, the very considerate dolphin Kenjuro took ten of the fur seals, the part-time “ABC trio,” and the shark Jaw off to another restaurant nearby, which got them just down to their reservation limit.



The man responsible for all the trouble, Ironbeard himself, quickly got drunk and started hitting on accounts manager Ashe. Of course, she'd probably be fine... Ashe knew just how to deal with men like him. She just smiled and nodded while pouring more and more cheap booze into Ironbeard's cup; he'd probably pass out soon enough.

Tiramii continued with his story, but Muse had grown so focused on monitoring the other tables for trouble that she completely missed how he got the yakuza man to forgive him. Of course, knowing Tiramii-senpai, he probably used some kind of strange magical item to bail himself out. She was more interested in what was going on at Salama's table.

"Okay, so... If you had to choose one of the four of us, which would it be, Wanipii?" Salama was asking.

She was half-teasing, but Wanipii began thinking hard, seeming to take the question in earnest. "Pii... Pii... Well... hmm... That's a tough one, pii... I've sworn my eternal love to Miiya-chan, see..." Miiya-chan must have been the idol he was talking about earlier.

"Oh, who cares about that?" Salama scoffed. "It's all hypothetical. C'mon, c'mon."

"You'll feel better after you tell us. Have some katsudon." Sylphie slid a small appetizer bowl under Wanipii's nose, playing the good cop.

"Pii... Pii... Um... In that case..." Wanipii cast a glance in the direction of Muse, sitting at her separate table.

What, seriously? I hope not... Muse thought.

Just as she thought it, Wanipii spoke: "Umm... Out of the four Aquario girls, Kobory-chan is most my type, pii."

"Hahaha! I knew it! Long black hair! Long black hair!" Salama cackled, while Sylphie pointed accusingly at Kobory, like a detective naming a suspect.

Kobory just said, "C-Come on, don't try to flatter me..." and waved her hands with an awkward smile (the correct response).

Ugh. Muse felt a bit pathetic for entertaining the notion that she'd be picked.

It wasn't so much about Wanipii; she just hated her self-obsession at times like these. *The thing with Kanie-san is that way, too...*

While Muse was drifting off in thought, Macaron addressed her: "By the way, is Kanie-kun not coming, ron?"

"Huh?"

"Kanie-kun. You said you were gonna invite him, ron."

"Ah... y-yes. But he passed," Muse explained. "He said he had homework, I believe."

"Mii. Kanie-kun never comes to these things. I've invited him to Savage a few times, and nada, mii."

"Moffu... Being acting manager is all the more reason to keep his distance, I'd say," Moffle said, as he drained his mug of Hoppy.

"Is it?"

"Yeah. He feels a certain sense of responsibility, fumo. And he likely feels that leadership should be a lonely thing, fumo... he probably thinks it makes him seem cool. And, well, that's about what I expect out of Seiya."

As the person in charge of tonight's drinking party, Muse could understand a little bit of what Moffle was saying. Of course, a single night of leadership couldn't tell her everything, but she could at least imagine the shape of it. Muse found herself feeling very sad that Kanie Seiya wasn't joining them. "Still, I wish he'd come by every once in a while..."

"Maybe he will, some day. But it wouldn't be tonight at any rate, fumo."

"Why not?" she wanted to know.

"Something's come up about the park. He's probably off gnawing away at it on his own, fumo."

"Ahh..."

"Wait a minute, mii! You said he'd be on his own... but Isuzu-chan didn't come either, mii! What does it mean, mii?!"

"Ah, that's right... Isuzu-san... she canceled today, too. She said she had some

homework for school.”

“Isuzu-chan’s also using homework as an excuse, ron? At this time of the school year? Seems fishy to me...”

“Mii... You think they’re sharing a night at the Alamo, mii?”

Macaron and Tiramii exchanged suggestive grins.

“Stop it, fumo,” Moffle interrupted with a grimace. “But, well, it’s very possible they’re having a discussion. You know how damn serious the two of them are, don’t you?”

“Mii,” Tiramii agreed. “But, but... being serious and indulging your passions don’t have to be mutually exclusive, mii.”

“They really are two of a kind, ron. They should hook up already.”

“Moffu. Honestly...”

From there, the three mascots moved to a different subject: They were talking about a recently released war movie, which left Muse totally in the dark. But Macaron’s words, “They’re two of a kind, ron,” lingered in her mind and sent her stomach fluttering with unease.

2: Seiya's Day Off

Seiya woke up feeling sick the next morning. He threw up twice in the toilet. At first he thought it might have been food poisoning, but that didn't seem possible— when he messaged Isuzu to ask her how she was feeling, she'd said she was fine.

He'd eaten every meal with Isuzu yesterday: for breakfast, he'd had AmaBri's "Set A" lunch in the cafeteria. For lunch, he'd had a box meal that Isuzu had made for him. For dinner, they'd gone out to the gyudon restaurant together.

He could conclude that it wasn't something he'd eaten. A psychological issue, then? Yes, there was ample cause there... He would have liked to just go back to bed, but he gritted his teeth, got dressed, downed some water and headed for work.

He knew there was no way he'd make the long bike ride up the hill to the park, so he commuted via train and bus instead. The train turned out fine, but the bus was a nightmare; he ended up getting off at one stop to barf up a storm, after which he messaged Isuzu to say, "I missed my first bus, so I'll be 15 minutes late."

Isuzu's response was, "Understood. Why don't you take the day off?" But Seiya couldn't do that. He had several important meetings to attend to today.

He got on the next bus, arrived at the park, and passed through the employee gate. Security chief Okuro greeted him there. "Good morning, Kanie-san! Fine weather we're having, eh! ...Oh, what's this? No bike today?" The lack of real suspicion in the guard's voice, though, suggested that his performance must have succeeded.

Seiya just said, "Yeah, the brakes need a tune-up," then hurried to the general affairs building.

He ran into Salama on her way to work. He said hello, but her response was more dubious: "Are you all right? You're looking pale." He'd let his guard down

a little around her.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he answered. Then Seiya entered the general affairs building, threw up one more time in the second floor bathroom, and carefully rinsed out his mouth before heading for his office.

Isuzu was at her secretary’s desk, typing away when he arrived. “Seiya-kun,” she greeted him. She was wearing her usual uniform, that of the Maple Land Royal Guard. It was a sleeveless red top with gold aiguillettes and a dark gray skirt. “Are you all right?”

“What do you mean?” He decided to play dumb.

“You don’t look well,” she observed.

“Yeah, I’m just fine. Aunt Aisu made me join her for a few drinks after I got home last night. That’s probably the reason.” He knew Isuzu was aware of Aisu, Seiya’s young aunt (and perpetually drunken roommate).

“I see.”

“Anyway,” he said. “Has there been any word from Digimall?”

Isuzu remained suspicious, but seemed to remember her job soon enough. She looked down at her PC’s display. “...We received an email,” she told him. “It isn’t from Lord Mackey himself, but from one of his lawyers. It contains more details about yesterday’s proposal.”

“What does it say?” Seiya wanted to know.

“Let me see...It’s more or less what Lord Mottle and I were worried about... It’s only a rough outline, but the content is quite extreme.”

“I see...”

“I forwarded it to you. Can you see it?”

“Yeah.” Seiya sat down at his desk and booted up his PC. It was an old model with an annoyingly slow boot-up process, so he changed into his manager’s uniform while he waited; thanks to the partition, Isuzu couldn’t watch him change. He sat down and checked his email.

“.....” Isuzu was right; the conditions were extreme. He felt the slowed

churning of his stomach start up again in force.

First, rights to all of AmaBri's characters would be transferred to the Digima Group, which would be free to make movies or merchandise of them as they saw fit. Even just using Moffle's face on a sign would require the Group's permission.

Next, Maple Real Estate (the corporate name for AmaBri) would be significantly restructured. Their current departments would be reshuffled and further segmented; leadership of each section would be held by a Digima Group employee. For instance, the head of administration, Tricen, would be dismissed, to be replaced by one of their own.

In addition, the park's attractions would function under joint control. Attractions that weren't profitable would be closed immediately and replaced by new attractions (which of course, they'd use the Mogute Clan to build) integrating the Digima Group's stronger IP. The Digima Group would also gain "input" into what the attractions would contain.

This was only the beginning.

In all facets of park administration, the Digima Group would have authority and control. Seiya's position of "acting manager" would become more or less ceremonial, with most of his role being comprised of negotiating things with Latifah—and the Digima Group could also dismiss him at will.

It was the same regarding income from merchandising: Currently, the park kept 30% of revenue, but from now on it would be 5%, with the other 25% going to the Digima Group.

Each attraction would be assigned a sponsor through a major advertising agency, and while this would obviously result in incredible revenue, at the same time, it would mean losing the sponsors that had stuck with them all this time. The new sponsors would also have some say in the casting for each attraction.

"Well? Unreasonable, isn't it?" Isuzu asked, her voice shaking, as though she was holding back her mortification.

Seiya smiled awkwardly and let out a sigh. "I'm not sure. I don't think they're serious about this."

“...?” she waited for him to go on.

“This is a sort of posturing that goes on before negotiations begin,” Seiya explained. “Of course they want to get as many favorable conditions as they can out of the contract, but they won’t really expect us to swallow this nonsense wholesale. We’ll work it out at the table.”

“Ah... perhaps you’re right,” Isuzu agreed tentatively.

“I mean, it’s true that we’re at a major disadvantage... Mackey knows we need to bring in three million people,” he said, “and that we’re grasping at straws.”

“Indeed. But, more than that... the conditions themselves. They feel like an insult.”

“Well, it’s not like they’re doing this out of charity,” Seiya remarked. “If I were in Mackey’s position, I’d do the same thing.”

“So, what do you intend to do?” she asked.

“Let’s see... what to do...” Seiya mused, struggling to sound nonchalant. He looked away from his PC to gaze out the window behind him— It wasn’t good to stare at a screen while you were thinking. He couldn’t see much of the onstage area from here; the general affairs building was short, and separated from the park by a thick patch of trees. He could see the great wheel, though.

I wish I could get on that wheel and just think things over there, he reflected. *I’d love to look out over the whole park, examining everything up close...* But the park was about to open for the day, and he was acrophobic, anyway. “...Sento. Can you cancel my plans for the day?” he asked, finally.

“Cancel them? All of them?”

“Yeah. If there’s anything you can’t get me out of, I’ll do it, of course, but...”

“Just a moment... let me think. I believe I can move the meetings to other days this week,” she decided. “The negotiations with the agency, too... Tricen and I can handle them.”

“All right. Make it happen.” Seiya hid behind the partition again and changed back into his street clothes.

“Do you intend to go home and rest?”

“No... I’m going to stroll around a little bit.”

“...?”

“I’m officially ditching,” he declared.

Isuzu did not breathe a word of objection... or support, for that matter. She simply said, “All right,” and then watched him leave.

First, Seiya went to the infirmary and laid down for about an hour. The decision to ditch, combined with the rest, proved much more refreshing than he’d expected.

“You were really snoring in there,” the medic, Auntie Peggy, told him. Of course, she was a two-heads-tall tanuki, so while Seiya called her “Auntie,” he wasn’t sure of her real age. Seiya thanked her, left the infirmary, and headed out of the park.

It was summer; it was hot; the sky was blue. He walked out the employee gate and headed east down the street. After about five minutes of walking, the guest gate came into view. The park had only been open for an hour and a half, but there was already a long line at the ticket booths. Seiya wandered his way to the end of the line.

Shady overhangs and electric fans helped to make the heat bearable; he felt glad that he had ordered them installed. His turn came up about ten minutes later. “One student, please,” he requested. “A day pass.”

The cast member who ran the ticket window, Drokko-san, stared in disbelief. “Kanie-kun? What’re you doing?” Drokko-san was a member of the real cast. Her head was a candy drop, and she wore a long-skirted, sailor-style school uniform. She looked like a Showa-era sukeban—a female delinquent gang leader. It was an odd combination of traits, but she was quite popular (for reasons Seiya couldn’t comprehend).

Drokko-san’s weapon was a yo-yo. Her catchphrase was, “don’t underestimate me!” She was apparently from a magical realm known as the Manpanan Kingdom, and was one of quite a few cast members at AmaBri of the “food for a head” variety.

“I’ve decided to walk around as a guest today,” Seiya explained.

“Huh?”

“Just give me a pass already.” He paid the price for the day pass: 4500 yen for the high school rate. This was standard for an amusement park—a little on the generous side, actually—but it still felt like a major expenditure. It would probably feel worse if you knew about their 30 yen days.

“Don’t tell anyone,” he whispered to Drokko-san. He didn’t want her using the work message board to tell the rest of the cast about it— they might think he was running surprise inspections, or something like that.

For today, Seiya genuinely wanted to be a guest. He wanted to stroll around the park and empty his mind. He wanted to go back to March, to the day Isuzu had first invited him to the park on a “date.” What had changed since then? What hadn’t changed? Maybe, in that, he would find inspiration.

With his pass in hand, Seiya walked through the gate and into Entrance Square. He was greeted by a cluster of buildings, shining white against the blue summer sky. It was a transformation of environment in every way, right down to the sounds and the smells.

The park was holding out its arms to Seiya. Everything around him seemed to shout, “Welcome!” The guests around him seemed just like they’d been yesterday, walking around briskly and cheerfully.

“Hmm...” he hummed. *Of course they are, though. I made it that way.*

“Ron! Ron, ron, roooon!” Macaron approached, surrounded by children and playing the violin. He whispered to him, “Kanie-kun, what are you doing in street clothes, ron?” He wasn’t braced for a surprise inspection; he seemed more curious than anything.

“Nothing,” Seiya told him shortly. “Go back to work.”

“Sure thing.” Macaron danced away from Seiya again, still bowing away. The part-timer Adachi Eiko was also present, urging guests who wanted pictures to form an orderly line. Eiko noticed Seiya, too, and waved to him. The other guests seemed to notice.

This isn't working, he thought. As expected, slipping into the role of “just a guest” was proving to be difficult. Even just entering one of the Entrance Square shops caused Merchan, head of merchandising, and other subordinate cast to call out to him. If he went to a cafe, Nick, head of food, and his staff would call out to him, too.

Each time, the other guests would turn and say, “Is that handsome man connected to the park, somehow?” (That first part was understandable; he really was handsome.) Seiya had come out here on a whim, but it was proving impossible for him to walk around anonymously. *I hate to waste that 4500 yen hurt, but maybe I should just give up and head backstage...* he began to think.

But just then, a voice addressed him. “Kanie-sama?”

He looked back and saw a strange girl standing there. At first he assumed she was one of the guests; a petite girl with longish black hair, wearing a summery top and pleated skirt.

“...?” He looked at her inquisitively.

“Hello, there,” she said. “Do you know who I am?”

Seiya didn't recognize her, but he knew her immediately. “Ahh... ...Are you... Latifah?”

She was facing him, but her gaze was unfocused, suggesting that she was blind. She had Latifah's noble-yet-charming features. Most importantly, he only knew one woman in the world who addressed him as “Kanie-sama” (although there might be other women who called him that in secret!). Her voice, too, sounded just like Latifah's.

“Correct!” she laughed. “Did I surprise you, by chance?”

“Y-Yeah... Why are you dressed like that? And... did you cut your hair?”

“No, this is a Gulley Suit LT!”

“LT?” he questioned.

“The LT is an abbreviation for ‘light,’” Latifah explained. “It is rather like a wig... Taramo-san of the Mogute Clan created it so that I might travel incognito.”

“Hmm...”

“When I take it off... you see?” She removed the black hair. Her clothing didn’t change, but Latifah’s voluminous blonde hair was suddenly visible below, radiant, like a shower of light...

“O-Okay, I got it,” he said shakily. “Put it back now. You’re drawing attention.”

“Ah, excuse me.” Before she caught the eye of the others in the shop, Latifah replaced the wig. She was once again a girl with black hair to her shoulders. Every time he saw something like that, Seiya was forced to wonder about the physics at play.

“A member of the Mogute Clan kindly brought me this far. It was so kind of him to take time out of his schedule...” Latifah was only comfortable walking around in Maple Castle itself; when she left it, she needed a guide. Seiya looked over and saw the employee door open a crack, and a member of the Mogute Clan—a mole-like mascot wearing a helmet—wave at them.

“I see...” he observed.

“Isuzu-san told me that you wished to look through the park by yourself.”

“Sento said that?”

“Yes. She also told me that you had forgotten something. She asked me to bring it to you... Here. Your very own Gully Suit LT.”

He pulled out a mask from the paper bag Latifah handed him. It was a mask of a human face; it looked a little grotesque. *Ah, of course. If I want to go around unnoticed, I can just wear this,* he realized. *Smart thinking. Thanks, Isuzu.*

Seiya had used this mask once before to disguise himself as another boy from his school. He already knew how it worked, so he quickly put it on. Then, he looked into a nearby mirror.

His reflection was that of an average-looking boy in glasses. The lips were a little thick, and the eyes a little beady... but he wasn’t going to complain. He was just glad it would let him blend in.

“What is your appearance now?” Latifah asked him. She sounded very interested.

“Hmm... I guess it’s... normal,” he told her. “Not great, but not bad. Wretched compared to my usual handsomeness, of course...”

“You frequently say such things,” she said wistfully, “but I also do not know your normal appearance...”

“Heh. Just try to extrapolate from my gorgeous voice.”

“Yes, that is indeed what I do.” Latifah smiled brightly again. Even in disguise, she was beautiful.

“Well,” he coughed, “if you’re all dressed up like that, I assume you want to go around with me?”

“If I would not be too much of a bother, yes...”

Isuzu must have planned this, too— She was saying, “If you’re going to walk around the park, take Latifah with you.” What Seiya couldn’t work out was her motives.

Did she really want to go around with me herself, but couldn’t abandon her duties? Did she want Latifah to have some fun, for once? Or was she worried about me going off to brood on my own, and just wanted me to have company? “I don’t get it...” he muttered. He’d wondered, time and again, if Sento really liked him. But each time something like this happened, it left him more confused than ever. *If she really likes me that way, I doubt she’d send Latifah to join me...*

“Well, forget it...” Seiya waved his hand dismissively, as if brushing away his hesitance. He cleared his throat and spoke aloud, “How are you feeling?”

“Ah, I am perfectly well,” Latifah answered.

“Just don’t push yourself too hard,” he ordered her.

“I shall not.”

“Good. Well, it’s been a while since we’ve done this, but let’s have a walk around.”

“...Er?” Latifah showed a moment’s confusion, which she covered with a vague smile.

Of course. The last time he'd gone around the park with Latifah had been in March— Before she'd lost her memory. This would be first time walking around the park with this new version of herself. "Ah... Er, never mind. Let's go."

"Yes! It shall be just like a date." She giggled.

"That's right. Yeah... you know, let's treat it that way." Seiya took Latifah's hand gently and led her along. He didn't feel the slightest hesitance about doing it. Treating it like a date— maybe that was for the best. After all, there wasn't anything particularly normal about a boy in high school wandering around an amusement park by himself. It would feel just as unnatural as having the cast single him out.

"First... okay," he decided. "How about Wild Valley?"

"Very well!" she replied cheerfully.



Hand in hand, the two set out. Seiya wished she could see the ways his renovations had changed the park, but even without her vision, Latifah seemed to enjoy herself. Most of the members of the cast didn't realize who they were (though a few of the more savvy types narrowed their eyes suspiciously at Latifah). Seiya enjoyed that aspect, as well.

And most importantly, Latifah was... Well... er... you know... Very cute. Her usual princess style was beautiful in an aristocratic way, and she took his breath away every time they met. But he couldn't deny that it also made her feel a bit unapproachable. Right now she felt closer to his level, which meant he could relax a bit more. She was still a little too pretty to be considered "just a normal girl," but she at least seemed like someone you might see on the Omotesando in Harajuku, while "blonde princess in sparkling dress and silver tiara" went beyond anything you'd see, even there.

The attractions were all as crowded as could be; most of the lines suggested a wait of 30 minutes to an hour. They lined up obediently for Toon Rangers, a ruin explorers attraction. But after that, Seiya decided he didn't want to force Latifah to stand in the heat any more than he had to. He started using his manager's ID card in the vending machine, which let him get all the fast passes he wanted.

Latifah seemed a bit reticent about this. "Would we not be taking advantage of the ordinary guests?" she asked.

"It's fine," he replied. "We're constantly stressing ourselves out over everything... Let's just treat ourselves for once."

"All right..."

"Also, let me know if you start feeling overtaxed, okay? Moffle would kill me if I let you get heatstroke."

Latifah giggled, then said suddenly, "Oh, I know!"

"...?" he waited for her to continue.

"Could we go to see Moffle-san?" she asked excitedly. "I would dearly like to see if he recognizes us!"

It did sound like a pretty amusing idea. “Sure thing. Let’s try it.”

He led Latifah to Sorcerer’s Hill. They entered Moffle’s House of Sweets: Blood & Bullets, and took on the viciously naughty mice. Moffle joined them in the last room, Hamburger Hall— Perhaps he was too focused on his work, or too tired from last night’s drinking party, but Moffle didn’t even seem to notice Latifah’s presence.

“Moffu! Moffu, moffu! Moffu!” Moffle rallied the troops, a machine gun in his hands. Latifah fired her gun timidly. Seiya joined the other guests in firing all around, and in doing so, they managed to repel the final boss. Latifah’s score was third from the bottom: Sixth out of eight. It was a pretty impressive showing, given that she was blind.

“I aimed with the eyes of my heart!” Latifah proclaimed. “No, I am joking. Each naughty mouse has a motor that makes a sound just before it appears... I simply fired in the direction from which the sound came.”

Seiya couldn’t hear the motor sounds at all, personally; it sounded like she was in Zatoichi territory. She could probably rack up a really good score if she went through enough times.

“Moffu. Moffu...” Even later, in the souvenir photo room, Moffle didn’t recognize Latifah. He treated her like any other guest.

Just leaving felt a little anticlimactic, though, so right at the end, Latifah drew up close to Moffle and whispered, “You were wonderful, Uncle” to him.

“Moffu. ...eh? Lati— huh?!” Leaving a wide-eyed Moffle behind, the two dashed out of the House of Sweets. Once they were clear, they burst out laughing. This might have been Seiya’s first time seeing Latifah laugh so wholeheartedly.

“He did appear quite surprised!” she exclaimed jubilantly.

“Yeah. You scared the life out of him,” Seiya chuckled. “That was some reaction.”

She giggled. “But I feel I should apologize later...”

“No need to apologize. The customer’s always right, remember?”

“Oh, you!” she said, then laughed even harder.

From there, their date continued. Latifah seemed to be enjoying herself—wholeheartedly enjoying herself. Her delight lifted Seiya’s own mood.

“I’m glad to see you’re having so much fun,” Seiya said as they enjoyed some crepes they’d bought at a nearby stand. It was a sign of how much his mood had improved that, after all his digestive troubles this morning, he could sit here now, eating fresh cream.

“Yes, very much so.” Latifah smiled. “Kanie-sama... are you?”

“Yeah... I’m having a lot of fun.” He’d meant to make it sound natural, but the answer came out haltingly. He was having fun. At least, he wanted to be... but thoughts of Digimaland and the issue with his magic lingered in the back of his mind. On top of that, he couldn’t stop himself from thinking about all the ways the park was lacking.

He’d been taking note of the cast’s minor interactions with the guests, the small shows of consideration. There were positives there, of course... but there were also a lot of problems. For instance, some cast members were very considerate of guests with strollers. When a mother bought a crepe at the concession stand, she would have to push her stroller with one hand. There was a bit of a slope to the path there, which left her in a dicey position, so a cast member would say, “Can I help you to a bench?” and push the stroller for her. This left the mother feeling extremely grateful. But when that cast member checked out for their shift, the other cast members wouldn’t do the same. They didn’t notice— It was like they couldn’t even see the mother standing there, looking around in confusion. They couldn’t imagine how hard life was for a mother with a baby.

He wasn’t angry with the cast members over this; he just found it depressing. The customer service manual that Seiya had thrown together for the year put it like this: “Always consider the feelings of the guests and work to make sure they’re not inconvenienced.” The first cast member had succeeded in that, but their co-workers hadn’t. The limited nature of the rules he’d put together meant putting a lot of faith in individual personalities.

But of course, he couldn’t make precise rules about every little thing. Not only

would a manual like that take forever to put together, but you couldn't get a strong cast overnight by telling them to read a bunch of rules. It took a long time, lots of lectures, and the kind tutelage of the more experienced staff, to really change someone's outlook. It also meant spending money, which would be difficult in AmaBri's current financial state.

Mackey's Digimaland could handle all of that. They had produced manuals explaining what to do about every little situation that came up, and whenever they had free time, the cast passed on their know-how to the newcomers. Knowing how to treat mothers with strollers was absolute beginner stuff. For the cast at Digimaland, it was as basic as learning how to tie your shoes.

"Kanie-sama?" Latifah addressed him, drawing Seiya back to reality.

"Ah... it's nothing," he said hastily. "Where do you want to go next?"

"Let me see... Might we try the merry-go-round?"

AmaBri had a merry-go-round, which was tucked away in a corner of Sorcerer's Hill. It was on the smaller side, and very old-fashioned, and full of wear and tear: several of the horses were missing their manes or tails, and the paint was peeling off the carriages. The lighting was broken here and there as well, in ways that cast creepy shadows on the horses' faces when it ran at night. Since guest clothing could get caught in the moving parts, and there was a danger of small children falling off, it had an age limit of 12 or over... Which sort of defeated the point of having it. It was a powerful reminder of what a crummy place the park had been before the renovations.

"Have you ever been on it, Kanie-sama?" Latifah asked, as they stood before the deserted entrance.

"No..." he answered. "I've watched it run a few times, but I've never been on it." A man in his late teens didn't exactly belong on a merry-go-round. "It's pretty old, though. I think it precedes the park's founding 30 years ago... Do you know anything about it, Latifah?"

"No. According to Unc— to Moffle-san, it has been here since the "Amagi Playground" days. But he, himself, only read about it in the documents..."

"Ahh," Seiya mused. "That's what I read, too..." Amagi Playground was the

amusement park that predated AmaBri's existence. It had laid fallow for about ten years after its closing in the 1970s, which meant that most documentation about it had simply been lost to time. Seiya genuinely didn't know how many of their current attractions had carried over from the Amagi Playground days, or in what form.

"But I do so enjoy this merry-go-round..." Latifah commented.

"How come?" he wanted to know.

"It is the smell... the smell of *animus*... the smell of those to whom it has given joy for so long," Latifah answered. "I can almost hear the laughter of the customers who rode it decades ago..."

"Hmm..." It was all over Seiya's head, but if Latifah was saying it, it couldn't be total nonsense. "Ah, well. Let's get on."

"All right!"

Normally he'd say, "You get on, I'll watch from the sidelines." But Latifah was blind, so he decided he should escort her— and wearing a different face reduced his feelings of self-consciousness. He took her hand and led her to a two-person carriage.

"A carriage?" she questioned.

"You're a princess, right? You deserve a carriage." Besides, Seiya didn't like the idea of putting her on one of those dilapidated horses. Looking excited, Latifah followed his lead.

Seiya and Latifah were the only two on board. Given how crowded the park was these days, it was a strong condemnation of the attraction's popularity.

There was an ear-splitting buzz, and the ride started up. First came the sound of grinding gears, which was followed by the scream of metal against metal, and an intense, worrying vibration. Music was playing, but it was hard to hear under all the noise— It sounded like Chopin's "Revolutionary Etude."

The carriage they were on moved in a rickety way that hurt Seiya's backside; It reminded him of riding a bicycle with his Aunt Aisu over the gravel road of Kasenjiki Park by the Tama River once, long ago. Ahead of him, to the right, an

unoccupied horse jiggled back and forth, hardly moving up or down at all. It was one of the most uncomfortable rides Seiya had ever been on—and yet, surprisingly, Latifah’s reaction was one of utter delight.

“Oh, this is... amazing!” she gushed. “Just amazing!”

“I guess it is, for certain values of the word!”

“Is it not thrilling?!”

“Yeah, a little too thrilling!”

They couldn’t talk without shouting. Latifah was so excited, you would think it was a roller coaster instead of a merry-go-round.

Seiya was happy for her, but inside, he felt frustrated. *I never realized it was this bad. I should have ridden this a lot earlier— the thing needs to be off-limits to guests.* The only reason he hadn’t taken action earlier was because it wasn’t an especially noteworthy attraction, and he’d had a lot of other things to deal with.

“But how delightful it is,” Latifah squealed, “just as it is!”

“Um... well.. I guess...”

“...You do not agree?”

“Well... I wouldn’t say... umm...” Seiya didn’t notice the shadow that fell over Latifah’s face. Actually, he did—but he was too consumed over what to do about the disastrous ride to give it any deeper thought.

Should I fix it? he asked himself. But so many of the parts were so old, he’d probably have to make special orders. That wouldn’t be cheap.

Wrenchy-kun, head of the facilities department, had told him, “It’s pretty bad, maybe you should close it down a while.” But it did still function, so Seiya had told him to keep it running, for now.

That was clearly the wrong decision. If I leave this thing as-is, some day, it’s going to cause an accident— And in that exact moment, the accident occurred.

There was a loud bang from the horse in front of their carriage, which had been vibrating dangerously the entire time. The metal part that fixed its pole to

the ceiling had broken, causing the horse to dip down with an ear-splitting groan. The part that had broken off—a ring a little smaller than a fist—tumbled down, hit the back of the riderless horse, and then bounced.

“.....!” It happened too quickly for Seiya to react. The metal part flew into the carriage, and banged Latifah on the head.

Moffle didn’t hear about it until after his live show that night. After a charismatic performance on-stage, he withdrew to the sound of applause.

While his fellow performers high-fived and congratulated each other, his assistant, Chujo Shiina, timidly approached. “Moffle-san,” she said nervously. “I need to tell you something...”

“What is it, fumo?”

“W-Well... J-J-Just before the show, you got a call... But I was worried it would distract you... so...”

“All right, just get to the point, fumo.”

“I th-think it might make you lose your mind...” she ventured.

“Hmph. Lose my mind?” he scoffed. “Who do you think I am, fumo? Just tell me.”

“Latifah-san was injured,” Shiina finally said. “She snuck onto the merry-go-round and there was an accident...”

Moffle lost his mind. He spat out the mineral water he’d just taken a drink of, then started pacing back and forth backstage in panic. He took out his smartphone and went through several failed attempts at placing a call. “A-Ambulance! Call an ambulance, fumo! What’s the number? Yes... 911! 911, fumo!”

“That’s America’s emergency number,” Shiina reminded him.

“Then 118!”

“That’s the Japan Coast Guard.”

“Er, I see, fumo... Then, um... um... 03-3238-****!”

“That’s the Fujimi Shobo editorial department. Why do you even have that on your phone? Anyway, calm down!”

“But! But! Moffu!” Shiina’s knowledge of phone numbers was even stranger than his, but Moffle was too flustered to consider that now. “R-Right, fumo. Where’s Latifah? How’s she doing? Is she conscious, fumo?!”

“She’s in her room in Maple Castle. The wound was minor, but... I haven’t heard if she was conscious or not.”

“Moffu!” Moffle rushed towards the underground passageway that would take him to Maple Castle.

“Wait, Moffle-san!” Shiina called after him. “You don’t mind me filling in for the rest of your work?!”

“Moooooffu!”

“Is that a yes or a no?! Um, um...!”

Moffle ignored her and ran down the stairs to the underground passage. He remembered hearing something earlier about the merry-go-round malfunctioning and being shut down. He hadn’t heard there was an accident, though... Could it be that Latifah was riding it then?

Exactly two minutes later, he was in Latifah’s bedroom in Maple Castle. “Latifah! Are you all right, fumo?!” he asked, kicking the door open like a member of a SWAT team. Then, he stopped in shock when what he saw was Latifah and Isuzu sitting in the parlor chairs drinking tea.

“Lord Moffle,” Isuzu greeted him.

“Uncle?” Latifah seemed perfectly at ease. She was dressed in plain clothes—the same outfit she had been wearing when she visited the House of Sweets that day— and there was a large band-aid on the right side of her forehead, but that was all.

“I... I heard you were hurt in an accident, fumo. A-Are you all right, fumo?”

“Yes. I was a bit startled, nothing more,” Latifah said with an awkward smile.

“A metal part from the merry-go-round happened to come loose,” Isuzu explained, “and it happened to strike the princess in the head...”

“It is fortunate that it was not one of our guests,” Latifah put in.

“How can you say that, fumo?!” Moffle had granted himself a second of relief, but he was immediately back to shouting again. “You could have been hurt! Who was with you, fumo? Isuzu! Was it you, fumo?!”

Isuzu slumped and let out a sigh. “No, it was Kanie-kun. He was wearing one of the Gulley suits, taking a day with the princess in the park.”

Now Moffle remembered. When Latifah had visited him, she had been with an unfamiliar male guest. So the man who had run off grinning while he stood there reeling from her reveal—that was Seiya, was it?

“A surprise inspection, fumo? But—”

“Not exactly,” Isuzu hedged. “It’s rather difficult to explain... I believe he wanted a change of scenery. A way to sort out his thoughts.”

“Moffu...” Isuzu’s statement made everything clear. Knowing Seiya’s personality and the offer Mackey had made yesterday, it wasn’t a stretch to imagine he was torturing himself over it. To go around the park as a guest—it was better than stewing in his office all day. And it was understandable that he’d take Latifah with him, too. “I see, fumo. All right.”

“Ah... might I ask what you meant?” Latifah inquired. “About sorting out his thoughts?”

“It’s nothing, Your Highness,” Isuzu told her. “Just a minor issue.”

“Yeah. Nothing to worry about, fumo.”

They had to choose the right time to tell Latifah about the offer. For all the disagreements those three might have, that was one matter on which they stood united.

“But today, Kanie-sama was—” Latifah seemed about to say something, then noted the atmosphere and bit back her words. “Ah. Forgive me...”

“So? Where’s Seiya now?” Moffle wanted to know.

“He went home,” Isuzu told him. “The accident must have been disheartening for him... and he looked tired as well.”

“Moffu...”

“I advised him to take a proper rest. I’m sure I can adjust his schedule tomorrow.”

It seemed best to leave such matters to Isuzu. “Understood, fumo. Latifah?”

“...Ah, yes?” Latifah seemed deep in thought about something.

“I was thinking about taking off early today, fumo. Would you like to get dinner with me after? Kobory’s family sent her a huge pack of udon. She shared some with me, so I thought I’d make some miso nikomi udon, fumo.” It occurred to him, suddenly, that with as busy as he’d been lately, he’d been neglecting Latifah. By the time his work was over, she was always in bed. As her uncle, it was his job to enjoy a leisurely meal with her now and again.

“Forgive me, Uncle. For today, I believe I should rest...” Latifah smiled her usual bright smile, but there was something depleted about it. There was no way she could enjoy miso nikomi udon in her condition.

“Ah, I... I see, fumo. Well, you’ve been walking around the park in this heat all day, after all. Sorry for being insensitive, fumo.”

“Not at all. I hope that we might share a meal very soon.”

“Yeah. Let’s make it a promise, fumo.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Let us promise.”

Isuzu and the others had told him to rest, but Seiya was in no mood to do so. Latifah’s injury had been blessedly mild, but it easily could have been much more serious. Seiya was so shaken and angry at himself that he ordered the cast member in charge to close the broken-down merry-go-round until further notice.

What that meant was that they’d probably tear it down. It would cost too much to repair, and in Seiya’s mind, it bore a stigma as “the attraction that hurt Latifah.” He’d told Latifah as much while her injuries were getting patched. She had seemed to want to say something else, but she’d held herself back, and simply assented. The mournful manner in which she’d done it was just another

log on the fire of Seiya's anger.

In the end, his little venture in the park hadn't yielded a single good idea; that was usually the way when someone hit a brick wall. He'd hoped that his date with Latifah would produce yield *something*, a faint glimmer of hope that a way out of the tunnel was in sight—but he hadn't been so fortunate. The only way to spark ideas now was to take action.

Thus, Seiya took action. The minute he got home, he made a few calls, then rode his bike back out to central Amagi City. It seemed he could still meet with the man he was after tonight.

It took him about twenty minutes to reach his destination; a golf course in the middle of a peaceful residential district. The sun had gone down by now, and the blinding white lights and the vibrant green netting stood out in sharp relief against the darkness. Even from the parking lot, he could hear the thunk of well-hit golf balls.

The lot was full of foreign cars: three Mercedes, two BMWs, an Audi, and a Volvo. Even the domestic cars there were Lexuses and the like. The practice range catered to the well-to-do, so the brick-tiled outer wall and the fountain at the entrance were all top-notch. He didn't see a place to park his bicycle, so instead, he leaned it at the entrance and passed through the automatic door into the lounge.

"Welcome. Do you have a reservation?" the middle-aged receptionist asked him immediately. She was polite and courteous, but clearly on her guard around the unfamiliar young man.

According to Seiya's advanced research, this place was often used by young wannabe pros in the region, but the receptionist probably knew all of them on sight. Ergo, Seiya decided to employ a different tactic. "Er... excuse me. I believe my grandfather might be here..."

"Yes, sir," the receptionist said agreeably. "And what is his name?"

"Hojo Ichiro."

"And could I ask for your name?"

"Um, Kazuki."

“Could you wait just one moment?”

“S-Sure. Sorry.” Seiya’s performance of a high school student feeling out of place was perfect.

Fortunately, the receptionist bought it. With a smile meant to assuage his nervousness, she returned back behind her counter. Of course, Seiya wasn’t really nervous at all— he’d been invited by many great stars and their wives to visit snooty country clubs in his child actor days. This practice range was no different.

The secretary had a short phone conversation with someone else in the building, then spoke to Seiya again. “Go on in. Hojo-sama is at the 12th driving range.”

“R-Right,” he said shakily. “Thanks.”

“Shall I show you the way?” she asked.

“No, thanks! I... I can handle it!” He gave her a low bow, then strode off.

Once the receptionist was out of sight, Seiya immediately dropped the nervous act. If he were an assassin planning to kill Hojo Ichiro, she’d bear a great deal of responsibility for what happened next; unfortunately, this was a simple neighborhood driving range, not a home to politicians and mob bosses.

Half of the ranges were in use. Coach-like figures taught young women how to stand, hold the club, and swing. Middle-aged men muttered and seemed to project their boss’s face onto a ball before they smacked it.

The man he was after was on the last range. He was a man of about 70, but his posture was upright. He had sunken-in eyes, sagging jowls, and long, shaggy eyebrows.

This was Hojo Ichiro, the CEO of the park’s mortal enemy, Amagi Development. They’d met several times before, so Seiya knew him on sight. Hojo didn’t notice Seiya at first, but just kept swinging his driver silently and skillfully. Each hit let out a solid sound of contact, and the ball flew straight where he’d aimed it.

“Hojo-san,” Seiya greeted him politely.

“...? Aren’t you...” Hojo stopped mid-swing and furrowed his brow.

“Kanie, from Maple Real Estate.” “Maple Real Estate” was AmaBri’s corporate name; it ran off of funding from Maple Land.

“I know that,” Hojo retorted. “What are you doing here? ...You’re not a golfer, are you?”

“No, I came here to talk to you,” Seiya admitted. “Someone in your company told me you often come here on Mondays.”

“Hmm. I wonder who that might have been...” Hojo muttered grouchy, then let out another full swing. The ball flew in a beautiful arc. “Sorry, but can we do this another day? I’m off right now.”

“You’re off most days,” Seiya pointed out. “You only come into your office for a few hours twice a week to play around on your PC.”

The old man glared at him. “I knew you were an impudent child... You pushed me several times on the land sale issue, too. But this is a little beyond the pale, wouldn’t you say?”

“It was the only way I knew to get a meeting with you.”

“I’m talking about your attitude,” Hojo told him coldly. “You’re being very aggressive.”

“And I think you know why,” Seiya replied. When they were working on making the sale of the second park a reality, Seiya and Hojo had gone through several rounds of negotiations, in which Seiya had always maintained a respectful attitude.

Now, things were different. He’d openly come to pick a fight with this old man, who had been the one to hand him the three million attendance quota just before the final Malmart negotiations began. It had felt like a stab in the back. It was the kind of thing he would normally reject out of hand, even if it meant scrapping the agreement. But because it had been the only way to guarantee the park’s financial future, he’d been forced to accept.

Hojo averted his eyes. It was just like during negotiations; the face of a man who felt it wasn’t his problem. “You know, those were informal discussions with

a rank-and-file member of the company. I wouldn't usually do that... once we got to the real negotiation among proper adults... you should know, it's only natural that other conditions would come out."

"But before that negotiation," Seiya retorted, "you told me the conditions were fine as they were."

"Did I?" Hojo hedged. "Well, maybe that was true at the time..."

"Proper adults" my eye, Seiya thought. Hojo had no compunctions about reversing himself on things he'd said before, or trying to worm his way out of this. Seiya had seen more than his fill of such people. And they always referred to themselves that way—"adults."

As far as Seiya had seen, real adults didn't have to refer to themselves that way. Well, they might use that phrasing under certain circumstances, but they weren't bragging about it. Loath as Seiya was to admit this, Moffle was a prime example; the man was an adult. He could lose his temper, he could get carried away, he could develop childish fixations... but he was an adult.

Meanwhile, this old man... He felt an urge to snatch up a golf club and break it over his head, but of course, he held back. If he was going to bust this man's head open, he would have done it in the meeting three months ago. What Seiya wanted was information. His anger was partly feigned, too. "Then what changed?" he insisted. "Who was it that fed you that three million figure?"

"Nobody did," Hojo said huffily. "I just decided, in the moment, that it was appropriate."

Let's go, Seiya thought, right before trying his magic. This was his second time using his mind-reading magic on Hojo. He had used it during the land sale to find points of compromise on the second park's value; that's why he'd given up on the possibility of ever finding out what the old coot really thought. Until yesterday, that is. But would Seiya really be able to use it on him multiple times, the way he had during his exchange with Isuzu?

It was time to find out. Seiya focused, and Hojo's thoughts revealed themselves. <<Could he know about Kurayama-san from Cosmic Studios? No, that's impossible...>> It worked! But that meant he'd used his magic a second time. He'd probably forgotten something.

Seiya did a mental catalog of what he knew about Hojo: Hojo Ichiro, CEO of Amagi Development. A graduate of Tohto University's engineering department, he'd spent 30 years in the Ministry of Construction and MLIT. He'd been appointed to the board of Amagi Development 13 years ago, and had been its CEO for six. Hobbies: golf and mahjong. His wife's name: Sadako. His children's names: Kazufumi and Mieko. His grandson's name— His grandson's name— What *was* his grandson's name?

That sense of wrongness confirmed it for Seiya. *That's it. I forgot his grandson's name.* He'd used the grandson's name just minutes ago in the lounge, but that information was now completely wiped from his memory.

Still, it was a small price to pay. Losing memories of Isuzu and Latifah and his other friends from the park was a chilling thought, but Seiya had no regrets about losing memories of this old man. He'd uploaded information about the man's personal life and past as cloud data, and he could access it on his smartphone at any time.

This will work, he told himself. *I came here hoping to get a hint about resolving this mess, but it looks like I might get more than that. This will work. Let's push it.* As he continued, Seiya took out his smartphone in order to have Hojo's profile at hand. Mackey was right that Cosmic Studios was behind this. Which meant that the next information he needed was—

"I see. Kurayama-san must have offered you a pretty good deal." The mention seemed to come completely out of the blue, causing the old man's shaggy brows to shoot up in surprise.

Seiya used his magic a third time. <<Deal? Does he know they agreed to make me consultant on their new park, too? Who is this child?>> Of course, a consultancy. They must have promised the old man a consultancy with the park they'd build after knocking AmaBri down.

Seiya had forgotten the old man's name. He looked down at the profile on his phone: it was Hojo Ichiro. Good, no problem.

"I don't know... what you're talking about," Hojo said slowly, attempting to keep his calm.

But Seiya kept pushing him. "Is that so? I know you have no interest in the

pocket change itself. I wonder how much a consultancy comes with. The yearly salary would be, let's see..."

He used his magic. This was the fourth time. <<20 million yen. Does he know about that, even? Did he hire a detective? No, a detective couldn't know...>>

This time, Seiya forgot his first meeting with Hojo Ichiro. That wouldn't be on his profile, but he'd detailed the meeting in his log book on the cloud. No problem. Seiya tried to shake him down even more. "If it got out that you were selling out your own park for 20 million yen a year... it wouldn't sound very good, would it? The fact that Cosmic Studios would be coming to Amagi would be big news, after all."

"Are... Are you all right? You're throwing around a lot of false accusations..." The fact that he'd guessed the exact number seemed to have the old man badly shaken.

Seiya glared at Hojo daringly. "That's not all I know about you. I know even more..."

He used his magic. This was the fifth time. <<What's he talking about? Does he know about the bid from Qatar? Or Marina and Takuya? Qatar wouldn't be so bad... but oh, tell me he hasn't found out about Takuya!>>

Seiya forgot what the man looked like. He remembered knowing a man named Hojo Ichiro, but the memory of his appearance had slipped out of his memory. A sense of disorientation assailed him, as he suddenly found himself talking to an old man he'd never seen before. He felt like he was going mad. A sense of vertigo overtook him, but Seiya gritted his teeth and told himself, *The old man in front of you must be Hojo Ichiro. You can't be sure, but it has to be him. Get a grip. Nail this guy to the wall!*

What was more important was what he'd just learned from his thoughts. A bid from Qatar? That was probably from his time as a government official... That was probably a long time ago, so he'd set it aside. It was those names, Marina and Takuya, that interested him. Especially Takuya... That was a man's name, and seemed to be someone he cared about very much. A mistress and a love child, perhaps?

"I know... All kinds of things." Seiya was hesitant to use his magic any further,

so he decided to switch to leading questions. “It must be very hard on you, having Takuya-san out there. Hmm... Kazuki-kun. Does your grandson know about it?”

“Damn you! That’s enough!” At last, Hojo exploded in rage. He looked like he might even charge Seiya with the golf club. His shout carried across the practice range, causing the other golfers to stop in the middle of their swings. Realizing that everyone was looking at him, Hojo lowered his club, trembling. “...What do you want? Did you come here to threaten me?”

“Threaten you?” Seiya’s head hurt. He was so sick of resorting to dirty tactics, but he felt no qualms about breaking this old man.

How much suffering had this man’s actions caused him? How much suffering had he caused the people of the park? Right now, Moffle and the others would be in the middle of their evening show. They spent every day and every night performing. Even when they were exhausted, they smiled and did everything they could to entertain the guests. And here was this man, playing a leisurely round of golf. He didn’t deserve mercy.

Yes, let’s finish this here and now, Seiya decided. “Yes,” he told Hojo, “I am threatening you.”

“How dare you...”

“Withdraw the three million condition,” Seiya said coldly.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“If you don’t, I’ll reveal everything. I’ll put it all out there, at the time that will hurt you the most— about the consultancy, about Qatar, about Takuya-san.”

“.....” Hojo was dumbstruck.

“I’ll say this one more time: Withdraw the three million person condition.”

“I can’t!” the old man squealed. “It’s not that simple! We’d need to change the agreement with Malmart, and—”

“No, I think it *is* that simple,” Seiya told him coldly. “Do it.” Hojo couldn’t hide how badly shaken he was now. He stole a glance at the other golfers, who had gone back to their practices.

Is it time to start playing on his compassion? Seiya wondered. *Do you know how desperate the people of AmaBri are? Do you understand how hard they're working? Do you realize the joy that they bring to their guests? You're the only one who can save them!*

But before Seiya could make the hard sell, Hojo began speaking, in fits and starts. "First... do you mind if I... make a call?"

"To whom?"

"Er... to Kurayama-san... This discretion... isn't mine alone."

Is that the man in charge of Cosmic Studios? he wondered. Seiya didn't know what kind of man he was, or the nature of their agreement, but Hojo would probably call him the moment Seiya left the course, either way. It would be better, then, to let them talk where he could see it. "Go ahead," he told Hojo. "Just keep it short, please."

"A-All right..." Hojo pulled out his feature phone and dialed. As it rang, he kept casting glances in Seiya's direction. It was like he perceived Seiya as a monster.

Go ahead and think as long as you like, Seiya thought. *But I won't let you get away. If you try anything on me, I'll keep using my magic. I'll use it as many times as it takes, and sink my teeth into your neck...*

"Ah... Kurayama-san. Are you free? ...Yes. Yes. I've run into... a bit of trouble... Yes. ...Er, it's about the... land deal... and the three million attendance condition. I'm not sure we can go through with it now... er?" Hojo's brow furrowed. "Ah... I see. I'm with a boy named Kanie-kun... Yes? Ah... what? And... that's all I have to say? I... I see." Hojo removed the phone from his ear, looking at Seiya uncomfortably.

"What is it?"

"Ah... well... He wants me to pass on a message... though I don't know what it means, exactly..."

"A message?"

Hojo proceeded, weakly and hesitantly, "Ah... he said... 'it must have been

hard crawling along the fence at the stadium’...”

The message caused the world around Seiya to go black. Stadium? Crawling along the fence? He knew exactly what it meant. Three months ago at Kajinomoto Stadium, he’d rigged up the circuit boards to cause a fire. It was a highly illegal act he’d taken to prolong the park’s life. No one had gotten hurt, but it was still arson. It was a felony.

In order to get into the stadium to make it happen, Seiya had had to spend an hour crawling his way across an eight meter tall fence. That was probably what “Kurayama” was alluding to— and he was doing it in a way that left Hojo in the dark.

The message, then, was clear. *If you don’t want me spilling the news about the arson, lay off of Hojo*, it said.

“.....” Seiya held his hand out to Hojo.

“What is it?” the old man asked.

“Your phone. Give it to me.” He half-snatched the phone away. Making a gesture to stay where he was, Seiya walked away from the old man. “Who are you?” He had an idea, but he asked anyway.

“Well, well. It’s been a while, Kanie Seiya-kun,” “Kurayama” responded over the phone. The voice was different, but he knew that slightly mocking tone.

“Kurusu?”

“Correct. And how have you been?”

“Drop the act,” Seiya told him flatly. “What the hell is this?”

“Hahaha. I thought this might happen, you see... so I told him that if any member of AmaBri staff started making unreasonable demands, that he should call me right away.”

Of course. How well-prepared of him. He had known in advance that Seiya would try to threaten Hojo.

“It’s easy to imagine what you were talking about with the old man,” Kurisu said pleasantly. “Well... it’s a good opportunity, so why don’t we talk things out, you and me?”

“Fine. Where are you now?” Seiya was in a mood to run there immediately.

“Ah, not tonight,” Kurisu declined.

“What?” Seiya was surprised.

“I have a few plans for tonight. How about tomorrow? Yes... perhaps Amagi Bridge, at nine o’clock PM.”

“Fine,” Seiya agreed shortly.

“Goodbye.” The other man hung up.

Hojo looked at him fearfully— at a “child” like him. Seiya almost told him to grow a pair.

“So?” Hojo asked nervously. “What did he say?”

“Forget it all.” Seiya threw the phone at Hojo. The old man rushed to catch it, juggled it a bit, but in the end, dropped it on the ground.

“Excuse me,” Seiya said, then left.

Seiya didn’t get much sleep that night. He commuted to the park the next morning, but Isuzu wasn’t in the office. He was about to call her to confirm some work details, but before he could, she called him.

“Sento,” he said into the phone. “Where are you now?”

“Maple Castle. I’m with Her Highness.” Her voice was tense; that alone was enough to get Seiya worried.

“What’s wrong?”

“Well... something strange has happened,” she hedged.

“What?” he demanded. “Out with it already.”

“The... The Princess’s memory has...”

“What?”

“Please, just come quickly.” Isuzu hung up.

Seiya didn’t need to be told twice; he rushed to Maple Castle. As he entered Latifah’s room, he found her sitting in her usual parlor chair, Isuzu by her side. Everything seemed fine at a glance.

“Latifah?” he asked cautiously.

A shiver ran through her, and then she spoke. “Isuzu-san. Ah... would this be Kanie Seiya-sama?”

“...Yes.”

Seiya was dumbstruck. Perhaps noting his reaction, Latifah continued apologetically. “Forgive me, Kanie-sama. I am told that you have done a great deal for the park and for me. But my memory... ah... it appears to be gone...”

AmaBri No. 2 Building, Studio 1

Chujo Shiina here, making a confession: I don’t know how I ended up in the idol unit(?), Task Force ABC.

I understand why Kanie-senpai strong-armed me into recording a single of the park’s theme song (which is different from having consented to it). I’m honored that people want to buy my songs, but at the time—that time—he let me stay credited as Part-Timer C. And now, for some reason, I’ve been put in with Adachi Eiko-san and Bando Biino-san to form a three-person idol unit kind of thing... I really wish I knew how things went off the rails!

Well, there are a few things I’ll admit to. For one, I do find wearing frilly stage outfits (that show off my belly button!), and singing flirtatiously, with a charming smile, to be a valuable experience. When my mother first heard about it, her nostrils flared and she proclaimed, “Shiina, do your best!”

I’m a woman; a girl, like any other. I’d be lying if I said I never wondered what it would be like to join the glamorous world of show business. But... but still... Having videos of me singing and dancing in skimpy outfits on the Internet makes me very nervous! What would I say to the people at school if they found out? Actually, I think maybe they *have* found out... When I’m walking down the halls at school, I sometimes see people pointing and looking at me! I saw a boy from another class comparing me to something on his smartphone, too. It’s all very strange for someone whose default mode is under-the-radar. I wish someone would just come up and ask me directly! Then at least I’d have a chance to explain myself! I never meant for this to happen! I never wanted to

flit around like an idol! I never had any delusions of grandeur! I just felt so bad for the people at the park that I had to say yes!

But when I told Eiko-san and Biino-san about how I felt, they just said, “That’s truly wonderful,” and, “You’re awesome, Shiina-chan!” respectively. I guess that when I mentioned that people were talking about me at school, they thought I was bragging or something.

That’s right... Eiko-san and Biino-san, the other members of Task Force ABC, are much better at rolling with life’s punches, and they always see the glass as half full. I’m the one who’s always pessimistic and hesitant.

“Um, um, it’s really a problem!” I insisted.

But Biino-san just grinned in response. “I bet it would be!” she said. “All of a sudden, you’re a big star at your school!”

That’s not what I meant!



“I bet that boy who looked at you had a crush on you!” Biino suggested slyly. “What does he look like? Was he handsome?”

He wasn’t handsome at all. He had a crew cut and glasses and he was very plain. He wasn’t exactly gross, but he wasn’t handsome either. “Um, just normal...” I told her.

“You’re so lucky! There are a few girls in the industry at my school! You know Kosaka Tomino?”

“Um, not very well...”

“Oh, yeah? Apparently she’s really popular these days...” Biino sighed. “I don’t stand out at all, in comparison! Ahaha!”

I truly envied Biino-san. She went to another school in the same city, and it was famous for its pretty girls (or at least, its girls who made a flashy impression). Biino-san was cheerful and nice, and I personally think she’s much prettier than I am... So if she didn’t stand out there, her school must really be something!

Biino-san turned the subject to Eiko-san, who up until that point had just been smiling and listening. “What about you, Eiko-san? Have people at your college been talking?”

“Ah, not particularly... I have done similar work in the past, after all. But one of my professors did tell me, ‘It’s good of you to do work that will bring comfort to lonely men. Do your best.’”

“I... I see...” The professor must have been influenced by the “AV issue.” I wonder if people think I’m part of some sexy group, too... So embarrassing!

“Wow, he sounds really nice!” Biino-san said, her own eyes shining. She was such a kind person.

“Woffle... er, Moffle-san is late, isn’t he?” I suddenly realized. It was morning, and we were in the studio in the No. 2 Building. It was summer vacation, so I was working full time days, and we were scheduled to practice a new song. But Moffle-san, who was supposed to come by to teach us, hadn’t shown up yet. We were supposed to meet up at 9:00 AM, but it was already fifteen past,

which was very strange, since Moffle-san was a very punctual person.

“Hey! Everybody here, ron?!” Just then, Macaron-san burst into the studio. He was a sheep-like mascot, woolly and soft. Eiko-san said that he was very handsome in his human form, but as I had never seen it, I found it very hard to imagine.

“Macaron-san...” Eiko-san’s expression brightened. I had never seen her react that way before.

What? Is it possible? It’s not possible, right? Excuse me; I must be getting the wrong idea. Macaron-san is a two-heads-tall sheep. He’s also a former delinquent and a very tough customer...

“Moffle’s taking off today for urgent business, ron,” he told us.

“Urgent... business?” Eiko asked.

“Yeah. I didn’t ask what it was about, but I’m betting on ‘hangover,’ ron.”

“Ahh...”

Macaron-san seemed very unconcerned about it. He passed out the sheet music he’d brought, and went over minor modifications to the lyrics and the melody. “That should cover the singing, ron. I don’t really do choreography, so I brought a substitute instructor for Moffle, ron.”

“A substitute instructor?” I questioned.

Macaron turned to the studio door and shouted, “Instructor! Instructor! Come on in, ron!”

“Coming on iiiiin!” In bounded our instructor. It was the Spirit of Wind Sylphie, a dancer with Aquario. Shouting in some kind of foreign language, Sylphie whirled and twirled. Her dance moves were truly impressive!



“The bursting smell of melon! Cure Eagle!” she shouted as she capped it off with a strange, squatting pose. “Well, what pose is that?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“What pose?” she demanded to know. “Three, two, one...”

“C-Cure Eagle?” I guessed.

“Bzzt! The answer is Sylphie Pose! Your punishment is 500 radio calisthenics!”

“What?!” I cried.

Sylphie shot me a wink and a giggle. “But today’s Windsday, so I’ll forgive you!”

“What’s Windsday?” I asked. Today was Tuesday.

“Windsday is whenever I am! Come on, everyone, let’s do our best!”

None of it made any sense. While we stared at her in confusion, Macaron-san strode for the door. “I’ll be going now, ron. Sylphie’s the best dancer we have, so give her your full attention, ron.”

“Um, um...” I tried to object.

“Okay, lesson one!” Sylphie sang out. “The history of dance!”

“Um.”

“The history of dance does not date back to the third century BC when Hannibal of Carthage crossed the Alps!”

“Um.”

“Lesson two! The fundamentals of dance!”

“Um.”

“Do not mix wasabi into soy sauce; put it on the sushi! That gives it more aroma!”

“Um.”

“Lesson three, the rules of dance!”

“Um.”

“Don’t feel! Think!”

“Um.”

3: Out of the Tunnel

Latifah had lost her memory of everything up until yesterday.

Seiya was so stunned that he'd been forced to leave most of the questioning to Isuzu, who explained that Latifah had reverted back to the state she always did on the first of April—in other words, the same “early 14” she'd been repeating for over ten years. She didn't remember Isuzu, or what she was doing in the park.

Latifah was a fundamentally intelligent and forthright girl, so despite her shock, she was able to take in everything that Isuzu explained to her. And yet, she didn't remember Seiya at all.

“What's going on here?” Seiya asked, not bothering to hide his frustration. They had just moved Latifah into the shade of a tree in the rooftop garden. “I thought her memory only reset once a year. It's July now! This doesn't make sense!”

“I don't... particularly understand it,” Isuzu explained. “As far as I know, this has never happened before. Well, I suppose it's possible it *has* happened before and simply not been recorded, but...”

“It hasn't, fumo.” Moffle appeared from a corner of the garden. “I came to this park when Latifah did, and I've never seen it, fumo.”

“But...”

“Trust me, fumo. I'm not hiding anything. I really don't get it, fumo. It was only yesterday we were promising to eat miso nikomi udon together...”

As Moffle slumped over, Isuzu inquired, “Lord Moffle. Doesn't Task Force ABC have a practice today? Shouldn't you be there?”

“I asked Sylphie to stand in, fumo. I'm in no position to be teaching anyone right now...” He tried to say it wryly, but he failed. Seiya had rarely heard the mascot sounding so grim; he seemed even more depressed and confused than Seiya himself.

Latifah reset once per year. That was exceptionally draining for the people around her, and likely took a massive toll on Latifah herself.

Resetting your memories and physical development every year might not sound so bad on the face of it, but for her, it was a cruelty; a curse equivalent to death. It meant losing everything she had gained over the previous year, and it happened annually, without fail.

Remembering his position, Seiya endeavored to keep his voice even as he probed further. “Who all knows about this?”

“Only the three of us,” Isuzu answered. “I told Nick and the Mogutes that the princess was laid up with a summer cold.”

Nick was in charge of the food division; he often helped Latifah make her wonderful croquettes, but of course, that wasn’t going to happen today. And while the Mogute Clan frequently helped Latifah in her day-to-day life, they’d probably realize the issue the moment they saw her. In other words, they couldn’t let them see her; they couldn’t have rumors of Latifah’s condition circulating among the cast right now.

There were only a few people in the park who knew about Latifah’s “reset problem” to begin with— The more veteran members of the cast had inevitably figured it out, even if Moffle hadn’t told them. After all, she never aged, and they’d have repeated interactions with her where she’d act like it was their first. Someone like Macaron would have easily figured out the situation on his own, and yet, he hadn’t said anything. Anyone who had been in the park long enough to catch on to the secret, would also realize that Latifah and Moffle wouldn’t want it getting out. (And then there were those, like Mirai-kun and Wanipii, who were probably too dense to catch on to start with.) They didn’t talk about Latifah’s problem because she wouldn’t want them to.

“Honestly. When it rains, it pours...” He’d meant it to sound joking, but neither Isuzu nor Moffle responded in kind. It had been such a shock to Seiya, after all; he could imagine how much harder it must be for the two who had known her so much longer. They were in no condition, now, to advise him on the issue with Amagi Development and Hojo, or on his talk with Kurisu (now Kurayama of Cosmic Studios) via phone.

Seiya took a deep breath; he had to get it together. “But isn’t it strange?” The thought rose up in the back of his mind unbidden, and he whispered it out loud, as if to give it form.

That’s right, he realized. It is strange. Latifah lost her memory every year in spring. For it to happen in summer, there had to be a reason. But what could that reason be?

Did anything strange happen to her yesterday? he wondered. *Of course, she went on the “date” with me... But that in itself isn’t strange. We’ve done it before, and she was enjoying herself. I guess there was the merry-go-round... She got hurt there— hurt?*

“Hang on,” he said abruptly. “Latifah still has her bandage on today, right?”

“Yes, I changed it myself,” Isuzu responded.

“How was her injury?”

“It’s nothing serious. Merely a scrape...” she responded, then gasped. “You’re right... the wound was still there this morning.”

“Moffu. Which means...” Moffle’s button eyes shone as he joined them in realization.

“Right,” Seiya answered. “Even though her memory was erased, her physical form wasn’t reset.”

“Isn’t that a bit of a leap?” Isuzu questioned. “We can’t be so sure that the changes in the princess’s body—”

“No, he’s right! That’s never happened before, fumo!” Moffle shouted excitedly, cutting Isuzu off. “Latifah always reverts to being 14 years old, fumo. She’s never had an injury linger through the change before, fumo!”

“Which means whatever is behind this is irregular?” Seiya questioned. “It’s not the ‘usual curse’?”

“I don’t know, but it’s possible, fumo! Either way, we need to have a specialist come and investigate.”

“A specialist, eh?” Seiya was thoughtful. “Who are you thinking of?”

“Maple Land’s royal doctor comes periodically,” Isuzu said. “But they usually only see her once per year, and it’s become more of a formality than anything.”

“Can you call them right away?” Seiya asked.

“I can,” she answered, “but... I wouldn’t expect them to know anything.”

“Moffu,” Moffle agreed. “They haven’t done much for her in the past, fumo. And if we call for them now, it might cause ugly rumors to spread throughout the court, fumo.”

Seiya furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“Well... moffu.”

“It could spread speculation that the princess’s condition is worsening, which would in turn cause trouble,” Isuzu explained, substituting for the stymied Moffle. “Rumors of her failing health could influence Maple Land’s political situation. It could spur a crisis of succession, and even cast blame upon Lord Moffle and myself. Not that I care for my own sake... of greater concern is that it might embolden the forces opposed to AmaBri’s very existence.”

“I see,” Seiya replied. Tricen and others had been providing him articles from Maple Land to read. The myriad political dramas he was learning about really took the wonder out of these so-called “magical realms,” and there were apparently groups that were passionate about shutting AmaBri down.

“If it’s not keeping Latifah in good health, there’s no need to go to such lengths to keep AmaBri in business,” they would likely assert if this got out.

“Understood,” Seiya concluded. “So we’ll have to call in *him*, right?”

“...?” Isuzu looked suspicious.

Moffle clapped his paws together in realization. “Ah... him, fumo. Well, we don’t have much of a choice, do we, fumo?”

“I don’t understand,” Isuzu said. “Who are you talking about?”

“Not telling. You’d just be against it anyway.” Seiya pulled out his smartphone.

That evening, the person(?) in question arrived at AmaBri.

“Ohhhh! I’ve missed you, Setsuko-saaan! Lemme at them tiddies!” The coarse, fanged, man-eating oni charged, tears streaming down his face, towards Isuzu. More precisely, towards Isuzu’s breasts.

Isuzu fired her gun. “Guh...” The elderly oni toppled over.

“I knew it would start like this, fumo...” Moffle nodded.

“I’m already regretting it,” Seiya whispered.

“Why must it be him, of all people?” Isuzu asked, voice trembling, hands gripping her smoking musket.

“Don’t write him off too quickly...” Seiya advised her. “He did exorcise Bando Biino, after all.” They’d invited the old oni, Obiza, once before to inspect a part-timer possessed by an evil spirit, and he had indeed managed to exorcise her. He had a flaw (a terrible flaw) that he lost his mind when he saw large breasts, but his talents remained formidable.

“We’re the ones who did the heavy lifting there, fumo...” Moffle grumbled.

“I just hope we don’t have to suffer through another quiz...” Isuzu sighed.

Obiza sat himself up sulkily. “What’s the matter with you people?” he complained. “You call an old man all this way, and this is the welcome you give him?”

“Shut up! We did feel bad about it until you started acting that way,” Seiya told him. “Why don’t you think about your own actions for once?”

“Well, I’m busy!” Obiza said, trying to defend himself. “I was doing a replay of the *SRWα* series!”

“Why now?”

“I’m playing *Z* too, of course,” the oni went on, “Since it’s got *FMP!* in it.”

“Then you can’t be very busy, can you?”

“Oh... shut up! Point is, you can’t call a man out here and then then treat ‘im like this! Show a little appreciation, then give me that girl’s panties!”

“Ugh, just follow us!” Ignoring his gripes, Seiya guided Obiza to Maple Castle.

Obiza looked grumpy about it, but was apparently willing to do as he was told.

“You’ll recall that I explained the situation in my email,” Seiya began. “We want you to give Latifah a physical.”

“Ah, so it’s more of that, eh?” Obiza’s expression suddenly turned serious. It was an odd thing to say about a literal ogre, but he did indeed seem pensive and thoughtful. “I’ve been thinking about that princess of yours for a while, now. The *animus* starvation curse... I’ve been poring through old texts day and night, but I couldn’t find much in the way of precedent.”

I thought you were playing *Super Robot Wars*, Seiya thought, but opted not to say it out loud. “You couldn’t find *much*, you said. Does that mean you found *something*?”

“Well, of a sort...” Obiza admitted. “I found a record of a princess with a similar curse from several centuries ago, in a magical kingdom that’s now dead and gone. But it didn’t have much in the way of detail... Nothing about how to remove the curse, or even if the princess was ever cured.”

“Hmm...”

“With nothing in the old texts to go on, I’ll just have to go with some educated guesses. It seems likely to me that the *animus* starvation and the reset of growth and memories are closely intertwined,” Obiza went on. “As you’re a mortal, I’ll explain what I mean: for magical realm residents like us, *animus* is like the fuel we run on. But there’s more to it than that.”

“What do you mean?” Seiya questioned.

“It’s also the power through which we gain experience, mature, and rise to higher planes of existence. *Animus* empowers us to grow up, and in time, to grow old.”

“I suppose that makes sense... But what do you mean, rise to higher planes of existence?” Seiya cast a dubious glance at Obiza, and then at Moffle. It was hard to believe they were on a higher plane of existence than young girls (“children,” supposedly) like Latifah and Isuzu.

“Seiya!” Moffle objected furiously. “Were you just doubting that I’m on a higher plane of existence, fumo?!”

“You bet I am.”

“Moffu! How dare you trivialize my experiences! You’re just a child, fumo! Puff you, fumo!”

“The gutter language isn’t helping your case!” Seiya retorted.

“M-Moffu...”

That old man, Obiza, is quite an idiot, too, Seiya reflected. If he were a spirit or fairy or whatever on a higher plane of existence, why would he say things like “let me squeeze your boobs” and “give me your panties”?

“Young man, that’s a superficial way of looking at things,” Obiza defended himself. “There’s a deeper meaning to everything I say.”

“I find that very hard to believe,” Seiya said in return.

“Oh, really?” Obiza raised an eyebrow. “What if I said that in the old language of the Schubert Empire, ‘let me squeeze your boobs’ means ‘peace be on your soul’?”

“I’d say you were lying!”

“And you’d be right,” Obiza chortled. “Anyway, I’d compare it more to... the way that, as your people grow older, they grow tired of being self-conscious about every little thing, and start telling dirty jokes just to rile up the young’uns.”

“I don’t understand,” Seiya complained,

“Ahh, yes, fumo. I understand what you mean precisely,” Moffle said with exaggerated wisdom.

“That’s right,” the oni said. “You get tired of projecting self-important seriousness all the time.”

“Moffu,” Moffle agreed. “And you stop pretending to be smarter than you are.”

Moffle and Obiza seemed to have reached some kind of mutual understanding. Seiya was still only sixteen and had no frame of reference for any of it, so it all sounded like nonsense to him. He looked at Isuzu quizzically,

but she was just standing there, slumped over.

“Ah, fine, whatever,” he finally said. “Let’s assume you and Moffle are fairies on a higher plane of existence, or whatever. You’re saying that growth is being blocked in Latifah’s case, right?”

“Right,” Obiza confirmed. “The *animus* starvation is hindering her growth.”

“Even the Maple Land physicians were able to infer that much,” Isuzu interrupted. “That doesn’t explain why her mind and body reset every year at the end of March, does it? Nor why it’s happening now, in July...”

“Indeed. So it’s time to ask the question: why the end of March?”

“Moffu. Well... because the curse was applied at the end of March, fumo.”

“Hmm. And it resets after a year. But who decided that?”

“The magician who put the curse on her, fumo.”

“How do you know?” Obiza asked. “Can you be sure it’s the magician who decided that the curse would reset her every year on the anniversary?”

“M-Moffu... Well, now that you mention it...” Moffle sank deep into thought.

All the talk of magic and curses went a little beyond Seiya’s understanding. Perhaps noticing his confusion, Isuzu explained: “Seiya-kun. You could liken a spell to a computer program; a curse is like a virus. Its activation is reliant on certain conditions or deadlines.”

“Ahh...” That made sense. Latifah’s “reset curse” had been activating at the end of March every year for over ten years; it was behaving, in a way, like a time-sensitive virus, so that’s what the Maple Land doctors (in the analogy, the programmers) had decided it must be. But Obiza was raising doubts: Was the virus really time reliant?

“It’s been the same conditions resetting her for the past ten years, right?” Obiza asked. “Then maybe this year it was some other condition that triggered it. Any idea what that could be?”

“Hmm...” Seiya’s murmuring wasn’t because he was thinking it over; it was because the old man’s question had hit a bullseye. He did indeed have an idea. “Me?”

Isuzu then nodded hesitantly. “Normally I’d say you think too highly of yourself... But I agree. The park has changed significantly since your arrival; it wouldn’t be a surprise to learn that your presence had affected things. ...What do you think, Lord Moffle?”

“Moffu. Sounds right to me,” Moffle agreed, reluctantly. “It’s a slow road AmaBri’s been walking these past ten years, fumo. Almost no changes, just gradual decline... Then Seiya arrives and gives it this big jolt of life, fumo.”

“I see.” Obiza nodded, frowning. “That’s a start, to be sure.”

“Really?” Seiya asked.

“Now, don’t go getting your hopes up,” the old oni warned them. “I’ve never dealt with a condition like this before, either...”

“Doctor...”

“Don’t get too down, though. I’ll do everything I can. My pride’s riding on it, and the princess is a fine girl. God cannot have abandoned her! Right?” Obiza’s uncharacteristically kind words seemed to lift a weight off of Isuzu, Moffle, and even Seiya.

Silently, they led him to the rooftop garden. They brought Latifah to be introduced to him.

“Ah... Doctor... I must apologize for taking this time out of your busy day... but I thank you for coming to see me.” Latifah appeared to be very nervous. That was understandable; Obiza was a stranger to her too, now.

“Yes,” Obiza said, pulling out his stethoscope. “Then first, let’s get those panties off.”

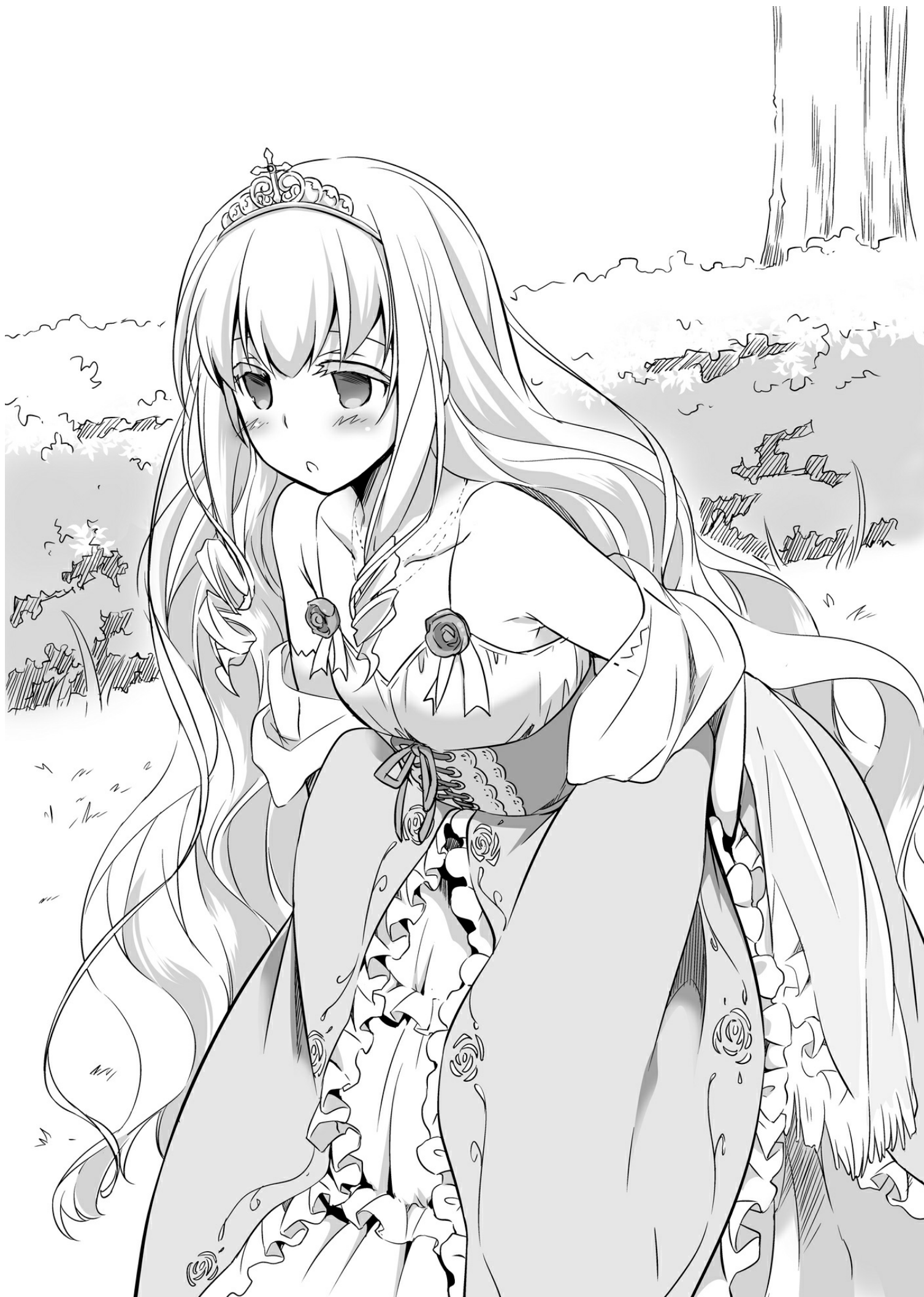
Seiya kicked him in the side, Moffle slammed a paw into him, and Isuzu shot him multiple times.

“You old bastard!” Seiya bellowed.

“I knew he’d say it, fumo. I knew he’d say it, fumo!”

“I don’t know why I thought, for a minute, that he might really be a decent person...” Isuzu said self-loathingly as she backed away from Obiza, who lay there twitching on the flagstones.

“For the love of...” Seiya groaned. “Latifah, don’t take him seriously! Keep your panties on!”



“Wh-What?! Ah, forgive me...” Latifah, who had been reaching for the hem of her skirt, straightened up abruptly in shock. She looked panicked, and her manner was terribly formal.

In his mind, Seiya had just been warning her the way he usually did; but to Latifah, Seiya was effectively a stranger right now. “Um... I’m sorry,” he told her, struggling to explain himself. “It’s just... this is how we always used to talk...”

“Y-Yes, I see... Er... by all means, then,” Latifah said apologetically, even though Seiya knew he was the one in the wrong.

“Anyway... well, the old man— I mean, the doctor—knows what he’s doing, I think. We’ll leave Sento here to watch him, so let him give you a full checkup.”

“...Of course.” Still, he remembered, Latifah didn’t know Sento well right now, either. He was struck by the urge to put his arms tightly around the anxious, trembling girl. Fighting back the urge, Seiya helped Obiza up. “All right, Doctor. We’re counting on you.”

“Ah... right.”

“And don’t take off her panties,” Seiya ordered.

“Well, I’ll try,” Obiza grumbled.

Too annoyed to argue further, Seiya silently turned away, and told Moffle, “let’s go.”

“Moffu.”

They arrived at a corner of the garden that looked out over the park, before Seiya turned back to see Latifah, Obiza, and Isuzu entering her room together.

“You think it’ll work?” he asked.

“I honestly don’t know, fumo,” Moffle whispered gloomily. “But I think the old man was on the right track with what he pointed out. Even if he can’t solve our current predicament, we might learn something new.”

“You’re very calm about this,” Seiya observed.

“Of course I am,” Moffle agreed. “I see Latifah go through this every year,

fumo. It hurts, but I'm used to it. I can't get depressed about it every time, fumo."

"....." Seiya had no reply to that statement.

"Anyway, what's going on with Mackey, fumo?" Moffle asked, looking to change the subject. "Isuzu told me he sent his list of unreasonable demands."

"Ah, that..." Seiya hesitated. "It's about what you guessed it would be. But we might need to consider it if we want to get to three million people."

"I see." Moffle's calm surprised him.

"You're not mad?"

"Moffu. I've been thinking since the last time, and... well, it's such an absurd goal, there's likely no way to accomplish it without some degree of sacrifice."

"I thought you'd chew me out," Seiya admitted.

"Offering a dissenting opinion isn't chewing you out, fumo. I wish more people understood that, fumo."

"Hmm."

"I wager Latifah'd go along with it if she knew, too. She's more worried about... ah, never mind, fumo."

"What?" Seiya demanded. "What is she worried about?"

"I'm just overthinking it, fumo. ...At any rate, I'll respect whatever decision you come to, Seiya. Just know that, fumo." Moffle seemed to have steeled himself for any outcome. After all, this park was supposed to have closed last spring. Not only had they gotten a new lease on life, they were pulling in more guests than ever before. No matter what happened from now on, it would feel like ingratitude to ask for more.

"Things are going to be tough," Seiya sighed.

"I know that, fumo. I'm prepared to be fired, too."

"That's why, before I make my decision..." Seiya took out his smartphone and checked the time. "...there's one last thing I have to take care of tonight. I'll leave Latifah to you and Sento."

“Moffu?”

“There’s a man I need to see,” he answered evasively, although Seiya wasn’t actually sure if he could be called a man or not. Still, it was time to have this out.

The Tama River, on the north side of Amagi City, was spanned by a bridge. It was called, appropriately enough, Amagi Bridge. Perhaps due to being off of a toll road, it didn’t get much traffic outside of rush hours— It had a walkway for pedestrians, but that, too, was rarely used. Even at 7:00 at night, it was practically deserted, an unusual thing in late July.

Seiya himself rarely came here. The light from the nearby street lights was so bright that it was almost blinding. He downshifted his bike as he neared the middle of the bridge and started looking around for the person he’d come to meet.

He didn’t have to look for long. There was a man leaning against the guard rail, playing with his smartphone, dressed in a full business suit despite the heat. He turned to face Seiya as he heard the bike braking. As expected, it was Kurisu Takaya, formerly of Amagi Development.

He looked exactly the same, right down to his hairstyle; he was identical in every way to the man he’d met before. Why, then, did Hojo refer to this man as Kurayama? Seiya felt sure there was some kind of magic involved. He might not even have to change his face; perhaps he could force others to perceive him differently, using a principle similar to that of the Lalapatch Charm. Seiya couldn’t say. But he was sure that this was the man he knew at Kurisu.

“Hey,” the man said leisurely.

Seiya got off his bike, not returning the greeting.

“I’m so sorry about yesterday,” the man went on. “The call was just so sudden, I had to resort to... emergency measures? Well, measures that were less than beautiful, you could say.”

“Are you the one who put the impossible attendance figure into Hojo’s head?” Seiya asked. “Why did you do it?” Then, he used his magic. He’d never used it on Kurisu before; if Latifah and the others were telling the truth, this

man was a powerful magician—the magician behind a curse that had left even the royals of Maple Land scratching their heads.

He had been aware of Seiya's magic the last time they had met. Seiya wasn't even sure if it would work on him. And yet it did— He was able to hear exactly what was on the man's mind.

《To see you all suffer more, obviously... oh? You used your magic already? What a surprise! And a close call...》The voice trailed off there. It was Seiya's first time using the magic on this particular subject, so he didn't lose any memories as a result.

"This is very unexpected," the man remarked. "I thought you were more cautious than that..."

Seiya snorted.

"But now you've gone and used your magic on me... Was that really the best idea?"

"Spare me your concern," Seiya told him dryly. "Now, tell me this: why are you tormenting Latifah? She hasn't done anything to you, has she?" He used his magic a second time. He had no interest at all in posturing and wordplay with this man; the bell for the round had rung, and he was going to come out swinging.

《What would I get out of tormenting that king? He's simply reaping what he sowed. The far more outrageous torment is... wait, are you using it again?! You used your magic multiple times?!》Kurusu's eyes opened wide in shock.

Seiya couldn't remember the name of the company the man was currently working with. *Whatever*, he decided, *I can just look it up later*. After yesterday's events, he'd written down everything he knew about Kurisu Takaya— every single detail.

"The questions will keep coming," Seiya told him coldly. "We'll see how long you can maintain that confidence of yours... Shouldn't you run away like you did before?"

"...Listen to the mouth on you," the man taunted, "But, it seems I made a mistake; I was just intending to toy with you a bit, but..."

Seiya used his magic a third time. «That's royal magic for you. I always wondered why it would be limited to a single use. Actually, this is... magnificent! I really do want that girl for my own. Wait... did you use it again? And I can't... even resist it...» Seiya realized that something was different in the thoughts he was hearing this time. No... He'd been vaguely aware of it before, and now he was certain of it. His magic gave him the ability to force a response.

In past applications of his magic, Seiya would ask a leading question, then see what answer he could draw out that way. He'd had to choose and time the questions carefully; one miscalculation, and he'd lose his chance.

But now, Seiya had succeeded multiple times in gaining information that, based solely on the questions he'd asked, he shouldn't have been able to. Yesterday, in particular, against that old man named Hojo... He'd gotten far more than he ever did out of his day-to-day surveys of his guests. Perhaps the difference was the malice and antagonism he felt towards them? He saw Hojo as his enemy; Kurisu, of course, was the same. He couldn't think of anyone else to whom he'd felt such a deep antipathy.

Kurisu took a staggering step. "This is... hah. Incredible. To drive me to this..."

"I'm not about to let up, Kurisu," Seiya said. "...Or, it's Idina, isn't it?" The third use of his magic caused Seiya to forget the day he met Kurisu, and what they'd talked about at the bus stop. No great loss; it was probably all unpleasant, anyway. "How much do you know about my magic?" he pushed again.

"I—"

"Talk!" Seiya used his magic a fourth time.

«I don't know... much. You can read a mind multiple times and force answers. That's all I know. Now I see... The magic of the royal line is powerful. It all adds up now...» The voice trailed off. Kurisu fell to his knees, struggling for breath.

This time, Seiya forgot the nature of the agreement Kurisu had made with the king of Maple Land. That seemed important, but it was gone now. Fortunately, the knowledge that he had cursed Latifah remained.

A severe exhaustion was beginning to come over Seiya now. His head was

pounding. “This is about when you’d run away, isn’t it?” Seiya remarked idly. “But I’m going to make you tell me this!”

“Wai—”

“The way to remove Latifah’s curse! Tell me, this instant!” He used his magic a fifth time. He could feel Kurisu’s terror, his desire to run away. He had illusions and teleportation that he used to escape—but Seiya was able to forbid even his use of those.

You must answer, his power demanded, and its force was uncompromising. This realization of the extent of his power sent a chill down even Seiya’s spine. The power to read minds, once per person, and only for a short time... That’s what he’d thought it was. But it was much more.

Kurisu’s thoughts came through again. «I don’t know how to remove the curse.»

What? Seiya was shocked.

«I erased my own memory, in case Kanie Seiya’s power proved greater than I thought. I eliminated any way to restore it, too... which was no great loss to me, as I never intended to remove Latifah Fleuranza’s curse, anyway...» The voice trailed off.

Another wave of exhaustion hit Seiya, yet he grabbed Kurisu by the lapels and screamed. “Damn you!”



“Ah-ha... Looks like my insurance paid off,” Kurisu said, a smile appearing on his pale lips. His forehead was soaked in sweat; he must be reaching the end of his rope. Then again, so was Seiya...

The price for the fifth use of his magic: At last, Seiya forgot who it was that the man had cursed. Even though he had just been asking how the curse could be removed...

Who was he doing this for? Seiya couldn't remember. He could feel his anger towards the man receding. He had lost the drive that was powering this use of his magic.

“Damn...” He released Kurisu to look at his smartphone. According to notes he'd taken before, it was Latifah whom this man had cursed. Latifah? Seiya knew her, of course... He could still remember the first day they met, what had happened since then, their date yesterday—everything. He also remembered how she'd lost her memory yesterday, how they'd called up Obiza, and the conversation they had had before he left. And yet, the fact that this man had been the one to curse her had completely fallen out of his mind.

His ideas about reality felt jumbled. It was a disorienting feeling; he wanted to vomit.

“...You seem to be... suffering,” Kurisu panted. “Maybe you should take a break...”

“Shut the hell up!” Seiya shouted with his last faint streak of rebellion that remained. He was running on fumes now, on the memories of malice he still felt towards him. One more time. That would likely be his limit.

The magic he'd been given truly was powerful, but it wasn't infinite. It occurred to him now, yes: power came with a price. Everybody knew that.

No, that's all right, he told himself. Give up on lifting the curse for now. What's the next thing I need to learn? He looked at his smartphone screen again, skimming through his enemy's profile. There was a lot of information, there; too much. What was the most important? What would give him a new foothold for investigation?

“...Three million people,” Seiya whispered. “That's right... why did you set the

requirement at three million people?”

“What...?” Kurisu was confused by this change in direction.

It occurred to Seiya that Kurisu hadn’t asked for something absurd like ten million, nor an achievable figure like 1.5 million. Three million was at the threshold of “just barely impossible.” That’s why Seiya had never given it deeper thought. But what if that number served a purpose? If it turned out to be arbitrary, he’d be wasting his shot— He could only use his magic one more time. And if he let Kurisu get away now, then even if they met again, he’d probably come back even better prepared. It was now or never. Something about that number nagged at Seiya’s mind.

“Don’t—”

“Answer me!” Seiya demanded. He used his magic a sixth time. He felt like his head was splitting in two.

《I don’t know, because it’s related to the curse. Still, I don’t want you reaching 3 million. I really don’t know why I don’t. Which means that it is a significant number...》 That ended his answer. Kurisu fell prone to the ground, shoulders heaving in agony. Seiya had also gone weak in the knees; he collapsed onto his backside, coughing violently.

The price for the sixth use of his magic was forgetting part of their earlier conversation. Tracing back what he could and couldn’t remember from recent events, it was probably the information he’d extracted from the second use of his magic. *What did I ask him? It might have been important, and I forgot it!* A powerful sense of unease began to pick at Seiya’s chest. “Damn...” he muttered.

But at least he had achieved something. He wanted to ask more, of course— like about what had happened to Latifah today— but since the man had erased his own memory about the curse, it seemed unlikely that he’d get anything useful. Besides, he really was at his limit. Any further uses of his magic and he might forget the information he’d just learned.

“Hahh... hahh...” Kurisu panted. A flatbed truck passed by them over Amagi Bridge. To the driver, they probably just looked like two drunks splayed out on the roadside.

“All right. The questions are... over.” Seiya mustered up what strength he had left and stood up.

Kurisu didn't try to stand. “I'm... glad to... hear it... haha...”

“You can't fool me by acting human. I know the depths of your depravity far too well.” Seiya wasn't deceived for a minute. He might look and talk like a man, but he was a devil. He couldn't allow him any sympathy. “But right now, I need your help.”

“What?” Kurisu hadn't expected this.

Seiya produced a multi-page document from the bag hanging from his bicycle and threw it down in front of Kurisu.

“What is this?” the man asked, feeling bewildered.

“A proposed alliance between AmaBri and Digimalland,” Seiya explained shortly. It was the document describing the deal. Of course, he'd omitted the details of the contract, but one look at the offer, and Kurisu should realize that it would put the three million requirement within their grasp.

“You're “Kurayama” right now, aren't you?” Seiya asked. “You seem to have gotten pretty deep in Cosmic Studios... So I think you know what you need to do.”

“.....!” Kurisu glared up at Seiya. His face registered shock, humiliation, anger — but most of all, shock. “You dare pit me against that buffoonish rat?!” He must be forgetting to maintain his human-like way of speaking; this was no longer Kurisu, but the evil magician Idina.

“If that's how you want to put it,” Seiya told him with a shrug. “I think I can get a pretty good deal out of it.” He limped his way to his bike, got on, and pedaled off.

On the way home, he continued to ask himself: did I do the right thing? To make a proposal to Kurisu Takaya, of all people... The very man who started all of this. The man behind all of Latifah's suffering.

But given their current situation, it felt like their only choice. It was the only

way to keep the park in business—the only way to keep Latifah alive. No... He couldn't say that for certain. He'd always assumed AmaBri's future was tied to Latifah's, but was it possible that they weren't?

If it wasn't, then which should he choose? Her smile. The smiles of the cast. The smiles of the guests. Seiya couldn't see a clean solution. He felt like he was still groping around in the dark, with no easy answer in sight.

But if he could get a slightly better deal for AmaBri by making Digimall and Cosmic Studios compete... No. That was just an excuse, to defer responsibility.

"Dammit..." Suddenly seized by a sense of self-loathing, Seiya stopped in the middle of the residential district, leaned up against a telephone pole and coughed a few times. If only he could think of something better... He racked his brain over and over, but nothing new came to mind. Just then, his smartphone gave a short vibration; it was an email from Isuzu.

"....." Seiya sluggishly opened it and checked her message. «We have the results of Obiza's examination. Please reply soon.» He'd intended to go right home and rest, but it seemed they wouldn't let him off that easily.

It was close to 11:00 at night when he finally made it to the park. Isuzu met him at the bike rack. The first thing she said was: "Are you all right? You look pale."

"Don't worry about it," Seiya said as he chained up his bike. "What did he find?"

Isuzu still looked worried, but he was in no condition to reassure her; he'd just been through a knock-down drag-out magical battle. "...It's complicated."

"Complicated?" Seiya asked wearily.

"You should allow Dr. Obiza to tell you the rest."

"...? Fine..."

They walked together to Maple Castle. Obiza and Moffle were waiting in the rooftop garden; they said Latifah was already resting in her room.

"So?" Seiya asked.

Moffle's response was an echo of Isuzu's: "It's complicated, fumo."

"So explain it already," he said with open annoyance.

Obiza stepped forward, then. "It's not all clear to me yet," the old oni began. "but I don't believe it's the curse that's caused the princess's memory loss."

"What?" Seiya was caught off-guard.

"I'll be more precise: the curse is part of it. But the direct cause of the memory loss is a major *animus* deficiency."

"An *animus* deficiency?" Seiya questioned, feeling bewildered. "But..." That couldn't be true. AmaBri had gone through a rebirth. Guest attendance had skyrocketed, and everyone was enjoying themselves. He'd been told that the guests' joy produced *animus*, which provided nourishment to residents of magical realms... Then, shouldn't Latifah have more *animus* than ever before?

"That's right, she should have enough *animus*. Here's something to look at." Obiza pulled an object from his doctor's bag. It looked like an old-fashioned thermometer, except that the liquid in the tube was blue. "This here's an animometer," he explained. "It measures the *animus* in a given location."

The name was a little on the nose, but this wasn't Seiya's first time seeing one; they'd been installed here and there around Maple Castle.

"The animometer reads approximately 3800 mieverts where we stand. According to the MHO, this means '*animus* is abundant, and you can enjoy a healthy day.'"

"MHO?" Seiya questioned.

"Magical Health Organization. It's an international body of the magical realm," Isuzu explained.

"What are mieverts?" Seiya asked again.

"A unit of measurement," she told him. "Don't worry about it."

"I can't help it," Seiya muttered. "They sound like units of radiation..."

"The point is, your castle is well stocked with *animus*. But according to this nitmus paper..." Obiza took out a band-aid-sized strip of red paper. It must have

been used already, because two-thirds of the paper had turned blue. “You see this blue part here? That indicates a lack of *animus* in the patient.”

“I see...” Seiya said thoughtfully. “Say, what’s the deal with that paper? How do you use it?”

“She puts it in her mouth. Then we wait three minutes and see if the red part changes color, fumo.” This time, it was Moffle who explained.

“You’re saying Latifah had that in her mouth?” Seiya clarified.

“Yes, fumo. ...Wait a minute, fumo. You weren’t thinking about taking it, were you?!”

“Don’t be stupid!” Seiya retorted. “It’s this old man I’m worried about.”

“Moffu. Now that you mention it...”

Obiza flushed suddenly. “H-How dare you! It’s true that the testing paper is soaked with the princess’s precious saliva... But I was going to dispose of it as medical waste. I sure wasn’t going to seal it away, take it home, display it on my home altar, and shave away a millimeter a day to add to my tea while occasionally licking it myself!”

“Give that to me. I’ll dispose of it myself.” Isuzu snatched the paper from Obiza’s hand.

“Ah. ...You damned whippersnapper,” Obiza complained. “Why’d you have to ruin it?!”

“Shut up!” Seiya exploded. “Why are you always a creep about everything?”

“You were going to abuse it, fumo!”

“It’s not abuse!” Obiza protested. “It’s recycling!”

“Just get on with the explanation!”

“Ugh... Ah, right. ...Anyway, the area is full of *animus*, yet the princess herself remains deficient. All the tests I’ve run come to that same conclusion.”

“But why?” Seiya wondered. Wasn’t recouping her lost *animus* why they put Latifah in AmaBri in the first place? If it wasn’t really helping, then nothing Seiya could do really mattered.

“Can’t say as I know,” Obiza shrugged. “What I *do* know is that the *animus* deficiency is what triggers the memory reset. The curse is involved, but my impression is that... it’s an automatic reaction.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The memory reset is a side effect of the curse. That much is clear. But it follows, to me, that the reset could have been programmed into the curse as a sort of safety mechanism. Blocking her growth with a reset prevents over-weakening due to the *animus* deficiency. I believe the lack of a physical reset in this case is evidence of that. But if she keeps losing *animus* at this rate, her physical body may reset as well.”

“So she’s in purgatory, fumo...” Moffle’s paws began trembling with anger.

“I can’t say what that magician was after when he did this,” Obiza went on, “but it seems the princess weakening and dying wasn’t it.”

“.....”

“Now, here’s what that means,” Obiza said, clearing his throat. “It means our problem right now isn’t the curse. What we need to learn is, why is the princess is suddenly so lacking in *animus*?”

“Do you have a way to find that out?” Seiya asked.

“I believe so.” Obiza pulled a new tool out of his bag. It looked like a pair of old goggles, the leather type with thick glass lenses frequently seen in old biker movies. “These are Umbra Glasses. Like it says on the tin, they let you see *umbra*.”

“*Umbra*?” Seiya asked again.

“It means the shadow world,” Isuzu helped.

Another new term. This was all getting more and more confusing. “The shadow world is, um... is that different from your magical realms?”

“Yes,” Obiza explained. “Our magical realms exist elsewhere entirely. *Umbra* is sort of the underside of the mortal realm; it’s all around us right now, you just can’t usually see it.”

“I don’t understand,” Seiya insisted.

“You stubborn little... You know, if you’re already like this as a young’un, you’ll wind up in trouble later in life. You’ll be the old man who doesn’t know how to use a smartphone, and has to bug his grandkids for help instead.”

“Nobody asked you!”

“Hmm. I know, fumo. To put *umbra* into terms a mortal can understand... it’s like the world you see through infrared goggles, fumo.”

“Is it that simple?” Seiya asked, feeling suspicious.

“Moffu. You know how certain birds and insects can perceive ultraviolet light? It’s like that.”

“Hmm...” Seiya felt like he was getting the idea. “So, what good will those glasses do?”

“Seeing *umbra* will let us search for traces left by the princess’s soul.”

“Huh?” Seiya was confused again.

The others spent the next thirty minutes offering various circuitous explanations, through which Seiya more or less finally worked it out. Their world (in other words, the mortal realm) was full of invisible magical energy (*animus*?). Umbra Glasses would let him see that energy as part of the visual spectrum. The “shadow world” was a place where the distribution of that energy could be perceived. In that sense, Moffle’s infrared goggles metaphor was probably the most useful one.

In the shadow world, one could see the movements and flows of *animus*; locations where they were strong, and ones where they were weak. In other words, it could reveal objects in an area to which humans were especially attached, and the actions they took around them. Obiza’s assumption was that by looking around Latifah’s usual living area with Umbra Glasses, they might be able to find the source of her *animus* deficiency.

Apparently, with sufficient training, certain magicians could see *umbra* on their own. Sadly, Obiza wasn’t one of them; neither were Izusu or Moffle. The Umbra Glasses could compensate for that, but they had their own drawbacks.

“Using the glasses requires a great deal of magical power,” Obiza said. “I can

only use them for about five seconds, and that leaves me exhausted. I can't use them again without a whole day's rest."

Seiya asked what would happen if Moffle or Isuzu used them, but unfortunately, their usage time would be similar. Their relative youth might let them use them a little longer, but not significantly so.

"Moffu. I trained in my army days to use some powerful magical weapons... You still think it's beyond me, fumo?"

"It is," Obiza confirmed. "The mana they employ is different from those of weapons... I've never served in a military, but I'm told that a warrior's mana and a seeker's mana are different kinds of things."

"Ahh. Yes... I see, fumo." It seemed something a bit like RPG classes applied; Moffle and Isuzu were both soldiers, so they weren't specialized for this particular tool. That meant they had a solution (of a sort) but no one to use it. They were completely at a loss.

Seiya asked a question. "Could I use them, then?"

Obiza immediately shook his head. "No, no. You're a mortal. You don't have any mana, and no power to perceive it."

"Wait." Isuzu gasped. "Seiya-kun is no ordinary mortal. He was given magic by the princess."

"Moffu! Isuzu?!" Moffle scolded her. Seiya's magic was generally a guarded secret. Apparently, it was politically controversial for the Maple Land royal family (it was bestowed with a kiss, after all), and Moffle was probably worried about the danger it could cause if an outsider like Obiza heard about it.

"There's no point in hiding it from Dr. Obiza now," she replied. "His sexual harassment is disgusting and I want to kill him for it, but he does have talent as a doctor."

"Moffu... well, you're right about that..."

"I'm not fond of the way you just referred to me... But is that true? Do you have... er... the royal magic?!" Obiza's voice cracked with excitement.

Seiya's mortal understanding of the situation was lacking, but apparently the

magic he'd been given was powerful enough to shock the old oni. "Yeah," he answered. "Is it... really that impressive?"

"Of course it is!" Obiza gasped. "You actually k-k-k-k-kissed that beautiful princess?!"

"*That's* the big deal?!" Seiya asked.

"Die!" Obiza wailed. "You need to die!"

"Moffu," Moffle agreed. "I've been waiting a chance to kill him myself, fumo..."

"Hey," Seiya objected.

"Kidding, fumo."

"You don't look like you're kidding to me..." Seiya muttered.

That's when Isuzu brought out the musket. "Enough. We're talking about Seiya-kun's magic. Well?"

"Hmm. Well, I've got to say, it's my first time meeting someone with royal magic... I don't know much about it." Obiza folded his arms and fell into thought.

"Is it really that impressive?" Seiya asked again.

"Moffu," Moffle affirmed. "I never asked what kind of magic you got, but it's likely powerful, whatever it is."

That was right. Moffle still knew nothing about Seiya's magic. He'd never tried to ask him, either. He'd probably judged, based on Isuzu's behavior, that it was none of his business... in which case, it wasn't right to pry. People (well, fairies) like Moffle were capable of making sensible calls like that. Of course, he was right to do so; Seiya wasn't planning on using his magic to find out what was on Moffle's mind. He could usually tell what the old bastard was thinking even without it, and if he did use his magic on Moffle... it would only be after the trust between them was completely destroyed. That probably wasn't happening any time soon. Any time *soon*, anyway...

"It's been said that those with royal magic have incredible mana," Obiza mused. "But like I said before, there are different types of mana, and without

any training at all... hmm..."

"Why don't we just test it, then?" Seiya said. "Hand them over."

"Ah?" Obiza was reluctant.

The conversation was going nowhere, so Seiya just snatched up the Umbra Glasses and tried them on. "Oh..." Moffle's comparison to infrared goggles was accurate indeed; the minute he put on the glasses, the colors in the world around him changed. It wasn't monochrome; it was all in cool colors. The places rich with magic were the closest to warm, but those without it were dark or black. Other than that, though, it looked just like their world. White outlines highlighted the plants and flagstones of the rooftop garden. Isuzu, Moffle, and Obiza were distinguished by yellow outlines.

"Can you see?" Isuzu's silhouette said, emitting a vaguely yellow light.

"Yeah. You, Moffle, and the doctor are... yellow. And the doctor's bag is glowing really brightly. It must be from the magic items in there, huh?"

The yellow light from the three grew brighter, merging together in Seiya's vision. "The light just got stronger... Were you surprised?"

"Yes," Isuzu told him, "very surprised."

"Hmm. It's interesting... some of the trees here are brighter or dimmer... That's the tree Latifah prunes a lot, right? And it's... yeah, it's brighter than the other trees..." Objects that people had attachments to shone brighter, just as Obiza had said.

Since Seiya could still make out the shape of objects around him, he could walk without tripping. He passed through the rooftop garden to look down from the railing over Sorcerer's Hill. "Wow... I can really see the difference in popularity between the attractions. The House of Sweets is... yeah, go figure, it's the brightest... It's all pretty much in line with the data, so it's not exactly educational... but it's definitely interesting."

"Seiya-kun."

"Aquario's bright, too, but the color is a little different," he continued. "I wonder why that is... Actually, all the attractions are different colors... I wonder

if it represents the different kinds of fun the guests have there...”

“Seiya-kun,” Isuzu repeated. Her voice was serious.

Seiya snapped out of his fascination. “What’s wrong?”

“Well, you’ve been wearing the glasses for over thirty seconds. Are you still all right?”

Seiya finally realized it, now that she’d mentioned it. “Yeah, I am.”

“You’re not tired?” she pressed.

“Not especially,” he told her. “...Is that strange?”

Isuzu didn’t respond, but turned to Dr. Obiza. Well, at least, it appeared to him that she had— in actuality, what he saw was her yellow light growing a little stronger and turning toward Obiza’s light.

“Well, that proves it,” Obiza observed. “The young man really does have royal magic.”

“Moffu. He’s likely a seeker type, fumo. Now, I won’t pry any further than that...”

“Yes,” Isuzu agreed. “It seems we’ll just have to leave this to him.”

Seiya took off the magic goggles, and the world went back to normal.

Latifah was sleeping in her bedroom. She seemed to be in such a deep slumber that there was no need to worry about waking her up. Given what Obiza had said, she was probably more exhausted than she looked.

“Latifah...” The bandage was still on her forehead. It felt to Seiya like the last remaining bond between them.

Seiya was alone in the room with her. The presence of Obiza, Isuzu, and Moffle would add static to the *umbra*, so they’d been told to keep their distance and remain silent. Thus, they had left the castle to wait in the general affairs building.

Seiya looked at the clock: 11:30 PM. The park was quiet. The residential and business districts were far away, which helped preserve the silence.

Let's go... he thought, and then put on the Umbra Glasses.

In an instant, Latifah's form changed to a yellow silhouette. He could see traces of yellow here and there around her, too. Things she used often glowed the same color: The bedroom dresser, the wardrobe, the record player and records...

But those weren't the only bright lights he saw. The parlor and the kitchen, the rooftop garden... They all glowed with the light of things dear to her.

He'd thought that if he could see what occupied Latifah's mind, he could find the source of her memory reset—or at least, a hint to its whereabouts. He'd been naive. There was nothing here that would fit the bill; Latifah's life in Maple Castle was peaceful and mundane. She had a specific routine, and there was nothing he could see that was out of the ordinary.

Wait... Suddenly, he saw something shining brighter than anything else. Points of light leading out of her bedroom, like footprints... Yes, they were definitely footprints... small, adorable footprints dotting the floor. Seiya decided to follow them. As he did, gradually, they became something more: a vague silhouette of her form walking just in front of him. The silhouette picked up the phone in the living room. It seemed to talk about something, and moments later, its entire form seemed to glow brighter. When had this happened?

After hanging up the phone, she returned to the bedroom and started getting changed. (It was just a hazy silhouette, so he didn't feel like watching her was inappropriate.) She changed her outfit several times. It was like she couldn't figure out what to wear, but at the same time, she was clearly enjoying the process. At last, she finished changing and left the room.

In the parlor, a Mogute-shaped shadow arrived and handed her something. It looked like a ball of green light, but Seiya knew at once that it was the Gulley Suit LT.

He was starting to understand what he was seeing. These were Latifah's actions yesterday; the events leading up to the date were playing out as *animus* shadows before his eyes.

Led along by the Mogute, Latifah headed for the castle elevator, and traveled south down the underground passageway. Seiya followed. He felt a bit nervous

about spending too long in this “shadow world” the glasses revealed to him. He thought several times about taking them off, but the thought that he might lose sight of her stopped him.

Her shadow continued down the passage. Occasionally, she passed another member of the cast, but nobody recognized her. Each time this happened, her silhouette glowed with joy.

She really does like her pranks, I guess... he thought. He’d only recently become aware of this aspect of her. Latifah loved harmless pranks, outsmarting people, and spooking them.

Predictably, the two silhouettes finally came to the Entrance Square cast door. Latifah’s entered the shop and spoke to Seiya. ...The shadow of Seiya from yesterday, that is. She handed him his transformation item; Seiya changed his appearance, and the two began to walk around together.

Her shadow sparkled with joy and anticipation; it was the strongest light of any he’d seen so far. He wondered why she was so happy about going around the park with him— it made him a little self-conscious, really.

The date continued to proceed as expected. *But at this rate...* Following her shadow was intriguing, to be sure, but Seiya was starting to feel impatient. This wasn’t going to lead him to the cause of her reset, and on top of that, he was starting to get tired. Apparently even with “royal magic,” he couldn’t wear the glasses forever.

Should he call it off and return to Maple Castle? But just as the thought occurred to him, he saw a change in her shadow. The light of her enjoyment dimmed, and a gray light (if you could call it that) enveloped her. Anxiety, fear, regret, guilt... A plethora of negative emotions latched on to her shadow and merged with it.

What the... Even though it was only yesterday, Seiya couldn’t remember what could have caused that. Had he said something to hurt her? Nothing came to mind.

He knew he tended to act arrogantly to keep people at arm’s length, but around her, he always tried to be considerate and kind. He couldn’t imagine saying anything that would upset her so deeply, even by accident—if he had, he

surely would have remembered.

They had just bought some drinks and were taking a short rest next to a stall in Wild Valley. They must have been talking about something, but it was probably trivialities... “It sure is hot” and “where should we go next?” and the like.

After a rest, the two shadows resumed walking again. As they walked, the gray light receded and the happy light from before took prominence again. She must have forced herself to forget whatever was bothering her, to enjoy herself in the moment.

This certainly is... concerning... Seiya decided to stick with it, and continued following her shadow. The phenomenon repeated itself a few more times after that. Once right after they left an attraction, once when they were just walking down the street, once when he was picking up a fast pass... There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to it. But there was one thing he was sure of: She wasn't wholeheartedly enjoying their “date.”

Why not? he wondered. Of course, he could imagine plenty of reasons... She had her own inner life, after all. Maybe it was her sadness about being blind, or her guilt about having fun while everyone was working. But that alone, he felt, wasn't enough to explain the darkness there. Why? Why did that “dark light” envelop her from time to time? He was starting to feel annoyed.

I've been working my ass off, tearing my hair out to give this park a future, to make you smile... he thought angrily. *So why aren't you happy? Is that smile of yours all a put-on? What more do you want from me?* Of course, Seiya knew that he was being unreasonable. Latifah wasn't a puppet to perform on his command; her feelings were her own. But why...

Dammit... Seiya shook his head. He couldn't afford to fall into self-absorption. The key to the mystery was right here in front of him; he just had to stay calm enough to see it. He continued to follow her.

They entered Moffle's House of Sweets, battled the naughty mice, and in the end, took their photo with Moffle. (Though it was the middle of the night, Seiya's manager ID let him enter any attraction he wanted.) Time and again, that gray light enveloped her. It was starting to happen with such frequency

now that it was weakening the light of joy she had started with.

At last they reached the endpoint of their date: the merry-go-round. The previous attractions had all glowed brightly through the Umbra Glasses: the House of Sweets burned the fiery colors of battle; the Music Theater was a passionate orange; the Flower Adventure was pink, for some reason. This merry-go-round shone with a color just like Latifah's own when she was enjoying herself—a white light, comprised of all the colors of joy. Its radiance might be the most beautiful thing in the park.

It was the exact same color as Latifah. In paint, mixing many colors together results in a muddy mess, but in light, it's the opposite: more colors just produces a purer and purer white. This was the nature of the merry-go-round's color: a white light, made from all types of joy. But... that ratty, ill-maintained, unpopular merry-go-round?

The two shadows got into their carriage and the ride began to spin. Her shadow seemed to be enjoying itself at first, but eventually, its light began to dim, and the dull gray consumed it once more. Then came the accident. Her shadow toppled, Seiya's helped her up, the revolution of the wooden horses stopped... And then, so did everything.

This should be the part where Seiya carried her off to the infirmary, but that didn't happen here. Her shadow stood up. Still a hazy silhouette, it moved leisurely towards Seiya, step after step.

《Is that you... Kanie-sama?》her shadow asked.

“Yeah...” Seiya answered hesitantly. “Well... not the me you were on a date with... um... Look, I don't really understand this myself...”

《I see... Have I caused trouble for you again?》

“Um... I don't really know,” he replied once more. *She had said 'again;'* he thought. *The Latifah from this morning wouldn't have put it that way.* “Let me check something... Do you remember meeting Mackey?”

《Yes. I welcomed him and served him tea.》

“What about before then? The night parade... hiring Rubrum and the Mogutes...”

《I remember. ...In fact, I remember everything from the first time we met.》

“I see,” Seiya said thoughtfully. “In April?”

《No, further back. Our reunion in March, my giving you magic...》

“What?” Seiya was dumbstruck. Her memory reset at the start of April every year. She shouldn’t be able to remember what happened in March.

《I remember when you were a child as well. The person I am in this moment... appears to remember everything.》

What’s going on? How can she remember everything?

《I cannot say why. I do not know why I am here, talking to you. It does not appear to be “me” truly speaking...》

Seiya wracked his meager knowledge in an attempt to draw a conclusion. “Ah... I think the real you is asleep in bed. Does that mean you’re something else?”

《Yes. The one to whom you are speaking is not I, but a composite of my memories. “I” have no will of my own... I believe I am borrowing some of yours in order to speak with you.》

“So... hmm. So it’s like my mind is running a simulation of what you’d say?”

《I believe that to be the case.》

He was shocked to learn that all of Latifah’s memories were accumulated (preserved? stored?) here, but the fact that he could actually talk to her based on those memories was even more shocking. “Ahh,” he manged to say. “So basically, I’m imagining a conversation with you?”

《More or less, it seems. But you must not consider it a baseless fantasy... I believe it to be a very accurate simulation indeed.》

“Hm...”

《But as it is not my true self having this conversation, she will not remember anything that is said here.》

Natural enough. This was all in his own head, after all. “There’s something I’d like to ask you, then. It’s about how you got the way you are now.”

《Do you refer to the curse? I fear there is little I can tell you about it... Forgive me.》

“No,” Seiya clarified. “I mean about why your memory reset today. I’m sure the curse plays a part, but Dr. Obiza thought you might be having some kind of personal problem.”

《A... personal problem?》

“Why is your *animus* so low? The park is doing amazing business compared to before. It doesn’t make sense.”

《You are correct...》

“Do you have any idea what it could be?” he begged. “Anything can help, no matter how small... Please tell me.”

《Yes. Let me see...》 Her shadow looked out over the park. The real Latifah was blind, but that didn’t seem to be the case in the shadow world; perhaps because it wasn’t a world of visible light. 《This park... It has many colors, does it not?》

“Yeah.”

《Where I come from, we assume that all *animus* is the same color... But perhaps that is not so. There are many different kinds... many different forms of joy, are there not? It seems absurd to think otherwise, when one considers it carefully...》

“Yeah, I think you’re right.”

《In which case... perhaps I am lacking something more important, separate and apart from guest *animus*...》

“Something more important? What is it?”

《I believe that you already know.》

Her shadow smiled sadly. At least, it seemed to him that it had—he couldn’t really see her expression. *Something more important?* he wondered. All of their customers were happy. What could they be lacking? “Sorry, I don’t know what it could be,” he admitted. Seiya wasn’t just being stubborn; he genuinely didn’t know.

《Then allow me to tell you. You are... suffering, are you not? Since the moment of our reunion in March, you have been torturing yourself. About me, about the park...》

“Well... of course I have!”

《I understand. It is a tremendous responsibility that you bear upon your shoulders. But I always see you so depleted, so exhausted... You are not enjoying yourself in the slightest, and... you are constantly haunted by regret.》

“I don’t regret anything.”

《The fire in the stadium... did you think I would not realize that you were involved?》

“.....” Seiya didn’t have a good reply to that question.

《I hope that you will forgive my candor... but even during our date yesterday, you spent every minute worrying, wondering what to do about the park, how best to solve things... And every time I realized that, I began wishing myself to disappear.》

Those must have been the moments when the gray overtook her. He now knew the reason: It was him. He’d been trying to conceal his true feelings, but she had seen through him. And every time it happened, she sank into depression. “I... It isn’t your fault,” he insisted. “It really isn’t. Maybe I do torture myself, but I don’t blame you... I don’t.”

《Yes... I believe you when you say that that is the case. Kanie-sama, you are a truly strong person. And yet...》 She hesitated.

“And yet?” he asked.

《And yet... I still cannot bear it. How could I? You aren’t happy! The one in the world most precious and dear to me...》

His heart thumped. His face flushed. He couldn’t see her expression, but he could hear voice trembling in sadness. “What...”

《Yes, it is true. I adore you... Kanie-sama.》

Silver drops of light fell from her hazy silhouette. They were almost like tears. But even without that, he knew that she was crying.



《I... I love you. You are in my thoughts at all times. What else can I do? Every time I meet you, my chest tightens, my heart beats faster, and I feel so happy that I burst with joy. So...》

“So... is that why?” Seiya asked, bewildered. “Because... I’ve lost my joy in your presence? That’s why you...”

《Yes...》 Her form receded. Perhaps she had slumped over, or she had gone down on her knees. She looked terribly pitiable. 《How can I feel any joy when I see you suffering so?》

She was right. It made sense. But if that was the case... “But if that’s the case... what do you want me to do?”

《I... I do not have an answer. I can ask you for nothing...》

“.....”

《I am a terribly cruel woman, always asking the impossible of you. I... I am a selfish coward, yet I feign the behavior of royalty... I am a devil. ...If you would only hate me, then perhaps hope might remain. But you continue to show kindness, even to one as wicked as I. Yes... I am an object of pity for you. And that is... it is so painful, so sad...》

It was an impossible dilemma. All this time, Seiya had been focused on strategies, tactics, routes to victory. His policy was to evaluate a situation, form a plan, and do whatever it took to execute it. He’d assumed that was the only way to resolve things. He’d even told himself that if he couldn’t do that, he’d be better off dead. But right now—being in this situation with her, he realized that was no longer enough.

To smile while grappling with an unsolvable problem, while suffering all that he could stand? *I can perform the act of a smile... Would that be enough?*

《Please, that is not what I want. There is no need for you to continue to sacrifice yourself for us... You must stop.》

I can’t do that. Seiya didn’t know why, but that was one thing he considered off the table. An formless urge began to well up from within him.

《Why not? Why are you so determined to...》

I wish I knew. I don't. But all the cells in my body are telling me one thing: Fight. Which means that fighting is all I can do. I'm not trapped. I'm not motivated by pity. It's not about you, it's about me. I'm doing this because I want to... In spite of what you, or anybody else, wants.

《Then, does that make me... your trophy?》

Maybe it does.

《This park, too?》

Yeah, maybe so.

《I... I see. It frightens me a bit... but perhaps such is the character of one worthy to be king.》

King?

《You are a king. ...The only kind of person, perhaps, who could face that magician...》

I don't know... I don't know much about it.

《Yes. Neither do I...》

The *umbra* began to break apart. At first it was like pops of static, but before long, larger cracks formed, the discordance increased, and her image began to fade. Was he running out of mana, or was there some other reason? Their connection in the *umbra* was coming to an end.

Seeming to realize what was happening, her shadow said, 《It seems time for us to say goodbye.》

No, wait. There's so much more I want to talk to you about...

《I am sure. But I fear I am incapable of stopping this...》

You've told me how you feel. But I haven't given my response.

《I do wish to hear it. But my true self will never learn of what happens in this place...》 In the end, she smiled, just like always. 《If you would, though... tell me one day.》

Yeah, I will, he told her. But then, he reconsidered. Still, this conversation is still all in my own head... if I say something to her based on this, will the real her

just respond, “Oh, I don’t feel the same way... this is complicated...”? And could I ever recover if she did? He directed his thoughts back to her. *Actually, for my own piece of mind, I’d like to ask more advice on—*

《You may not. Good luck!》

No, wait—

《Goodbye! Take care!》

His vision cracked. No... it was the lenses of the Umbra Glasses that had cracked. Suddenly, Seiya couldn’t see anything. He took the glasses off and found himself in the pitch-black park, after hours. The cornucopia of light that had surrounded him was no more. He stood alone in front of the dingy merry-go-round. At last, his exhaustion overtook him. Just before he passed out, he heard Sento Isuzu somewhere nearby, calling his name.

When he opened his eyes, it was morning the next day. He was on the leather sofa in his air conditioned office. Isuzu was sleeping behind the reception desk, but she awoke the moment Seiya stirred. He asked her what had happened.

She explained that she had found him passed out in front of the merry-go-round, and brought him back to the office. She had stayed up all night, it seemed, to look after him. Apparently it was just exhaustion, but—

“How’s Latifah doing now?” he asked.

“Her condition is unchanged,” Isuzu told him. “As expected, her memory hasn’t returned...”

“I see...” Isuzu was despondent, but Seiya wasn’t rattled by the news. He hadn’t really expected anything else. He was starting to get a vague idea about what he should do; it wasn’t fully clear yet, but he felt like there was an answer somewhere.

Perhaps owing to Seiya’s tight-lipped nature about the incident, Isuzu didn’t pry regarding what had happened at the merry-go-round. She explained that Obiza and Moffle were taking shifts watching Latifah.

Seiya washed up, had a cup of coffee, and returned to the office. Isuzu was

just checking her email; she squinted at the monitor, then gasped.

“What’s wrong?” Seiya asked.

“I don’t believe it,” she said. “Cosmic Studios is requesting a business partnership...”

“Oh.” He was expecting that, too. Now it would come down to negotiations—depressing negotiations about how best to keep the park on life support. Digimall or Cosmic Studios: Neither partnership could lead to anything good.

That night, they decided on a place to meet and discuss unofficially. The idea was that Digimall and Cosmic would both make their proposals, and AmaBri would offer their own opinion. No individual negotiations; the parties involved would put it all on the table, as if they were at an auction. Those involved would be kept to a bare minimum, and to keep things simple, mortals who didn’t know about the broader situation would be forbidden to attend.

The meeting was Seiya’s idea. Isuzu had worried about whether they would accept, but Seiya knew that they would— and in fact, he was right.

Just before the meeting, Seiya went to the rooftop garden and found Muffle waiting there. He was staying with Latifah today, leaving most of his park work to a person in a costume. “Latifah’s resting, fumo. Her memory hasn’t changed.”

“I see...” Seiya wanted to talk to her before the meeting, but... Nothing to be done about that. Besides, in her current condition, explaining the situation would likely just frighten and confuse her.

“Muffu... Pitting Digimall and Cosmic against each other, eh? I’m not sure that’s one I’d have come up with, fumo.” Isuzu must have explained the situation to Muffle, who seemed surprisingly accepting of it.

“I wonder,” Seiya replied. “Well... it seemed like a way to get us slightly better conditions, at least.”

“Only slightly better, fumo?”

“Yeah. It’s a lesser-of-two-evils kind of situation.”

“Moffu...”

They were both feeling drained. It was hard to be cheerful when they were about to hold a bidding war for AmaBri, itself.

“There are rumors going around the cast already, fumo.”

“About the offer?” Seiya clarified.

“Moffu. The only ones who know about it are you, me, and Isuzu, so I don’t think it leaked out from our side. If I had to guess...”

“Mackey?”

“Yeah. I suspect he was talking to someone in the cast on social media and let it slip. It’s his way of rattling us, fumo.”

“Hmm. Very gentlemanly, that old friend of yours,” Seiya remarked.

“Stop it, fumo.” Moffle waved his paw in disgust.

“Are you coming to the meeting?”

“No, I’ll be staying here with Latifah,” Moffle decided. “But don’t worry. No matter what you decide, I’ll support you.”

“I see. I’m off, then.”

“Seiya. Don’t push yourself too hard, fumo.”

“.....Right.” Seiya left the rooftop garden. *Don’t push myself too hard, huh?* he thought to himself as he rode the Maple Castle elevator down. That was roughly what Latifah had told him, too... Isuzu would surely say the same thing; so would the others.

A vague image was starting to form in the back of his mind. A completely different road to be taken... one that he could enjoy, too. *It might just work*, he thought. Unfortunately, his reason was flatly rejecting the idea.

Just as Seiya returned to the general affairs building, he received word that Mackey had arrived.

“He’s coming by car today, he said,” Isuzu told him.

“There’s a surprise,” Seiya responded. “I thought he’d want to spook our cast with another flashy helicopter entrance...”

He went to the employee parking lot. A limo, long-bodied like a dachshund, parked there, and Mackey got out and spoke: “Haha! I wanted to bring my helicopter, but it was out for maintenance! Haha!”

“Well, that limousine is certainly flashy enough...” Seiya observed.

“Neat, huh? It’s bulletproof too, haha! It could survive a direct hit from an RPG!”

Seiya had noticed the thickness of the door when Mackey had gotten out; 30 centimeters at the least.

“Anyway, Kanie-kun!”

“Yes?”

“I can’t believe you’re making me bid against Cosmic! That’s what I call hardball! Haha!” Mackey’s demeanor was bright and cheerful, but it didn’t sound like a compliment.

“We are desperate, after all,” Seiya pointed out.

“Yeah! But I was just tryin’ to help you out, yanno! This is how you repay me? It’s almost enough to make a guy stop playing nice! Haha!”

Yeah, he’s mad. But Seiya had expected that. Mackey was likable enough, but he was also a shrewd businessman, and he certainly wasn’t on AmaBri’s side. Seiya was ready to use his magic on him at any moment.

Mackey was accompanied by two beautiful blondes; his secretary and his lawyer, apparently. One had cat ears, and the other dog ears, so they were probably residents of magical realms.

Cosmic Studios’ delegation arrived a few minutes later. It was made up of “Kurayama” and two of his subordinates. The subordinates were middle-aged men, their appearances so unremarkable as to be almost beneath notice. It occurred to Seiya that they might not really be human, but puppets controlled with magic.

“Kurayama, Cosmic Studios.” “Kurayama” held out a business card. Isuzu

accepted it politely and handed him her own. She didn't seem to have the slightest idea that he was Idina, or the former Kurisu Takaya, even though his appearance was exactly the same. Seiya was the only one who recognized him, then; he wondered what kind of spell was behind it.

Seiya hadn't told Isuzu about "Kurayama's" true identity, either. To say that she would disapprove of negotiations with that magician would be an understatement. She might even try to kill him on the spot, and as cathartic as that would be, they couldn't afford to be rid of him; he might yet offer a hint as to how to cure Latifah's curse.

And even if Seiya could convince her to hold off, knowing the evil magician was there would probably just stress her out. He could just tell her later.

"...What's wrong, Seiya-kun?" Isuzu asked, sounding concerned.

"Well..." he hedged.

As he watched the interaction, "Kurayama's" eyebrow quirked upwards. He must have reasoned out that Seiya hadn't told Isuzu his true identity. "...Thank you for considering my company's request. I hope we can build a mutually beneficial relationship," "Kurayama" said. It might have seemed like his usual mockery, but Seiya knew that wasn't really what it was; he was working hard to hide his displeasure at being dragged out here by Seiya.

"It's... a pleasure, truly," Isuzu said politely, though she still seemed a bit dissatisfied. Perhaps she could sense that something was off.

They moved to the conference room in the general affairs building. Mackey and "Kurayama" greeted each other courteously enough; Mackey made small talk (in a way that suggested a little malice), and "Kurayama" grinned and bore it. Mackey didn't seem to realize who he was dealing with, either, at least as far as Seiya could see.

"Okay, let's move on already! Haha! I've got a shoot tomorrow in California!" And with that, the meeting commenced. Digimaland's new conditions were just a little bit more relaxed than before. The only major improvement was a guarantee that AmaBri's most popular attractions—the top five—would remain intact. That would mean, Moffle's House of Sweets, Macaron's Music Theater, Tiramii's Flower Adventure, Aquario, and Rubrum's Training Grounds.

Conversely, that meant that all the other attractions would end up closed, including the stage show that was currently gaining popularity, and the summer-only pool. A few other conditions had improved on their end, too, but most of the cast was still destined to lose their jobs. “Haha! I’ve been thinking awful hard about this! I hope you’ll make a wise decision! Haha!”

Seiya couldn’t deny the merit of it. As Mackey had said during their last meeting, Digimaland was making them an extremely powerful offer. They were capable of opening tons of attractions, swiftly, based on globally known, extremely famous IP. Any other manager of an insignificant park would jump at the offer.

“Now, our own offer.” Cosmic Studios took their turn. The conditions that “Kurayama” offered were extremely appealing. The sweetest was in regards to the three million attendance issue— Cosmic Studios had a good relationship with Amagi Development, and they claimed that if their offer was accepted, they could get the attendance requirement lowered to two million. Then, even if Amagi Development didn’t accept, Cosmic would shoulder the burden for lost profits.

In other words, for all intents and purposes, the three million attendance requirement would be relaxed to two million. Two million. Those were numbers that AmaBri, in its current state, might just be able to reach under their own efforts.

The conditions of the offer itself were much better for them than Digima’s, too— They’d get to keep almost twice the attractions, and they could guarantee jobs for at least 50% of their employees, including backstage cast. The IP being offered couldn’t reach the popularity of Digima’s, to be sure, but they did have two or three recent hits. The main issue was that the park’s name would be changed to Tokyo Cosmic Studios; not even “Kurayama” could block the company’s opinion on that. Even so...

“Haha... guess Cosmic’s pretty serious, eh?” The conditions were enough to cast some rain clouds over Mackey’s sunny disposition.

“Okay, now that both offers are on the table...” Seiya said, glancing at Isuzu. She looked despondent; understandably so.

Either deal would mean the end of AmaBri as they knew it. Even at best, they'd lose half of their coworkers, and even if they all managed to find new jobs right away, the loss would cast a pall over the mood of the park. Drinking parties at Suzuran Shopping Street? They'd never happen again.

"...I've prepared separate rooms for each party. If you wish to revise your conditions, feel free to go there and discuss," Seiya said, finally. In other words, he was saying, "if you have another card to play, now's the time." He wouldn't make final agreements just yet, but what conditions they brought next would determine the winner in this battle.

Mackey and "Kurayama" both looked at Seiya, their manners somewhat strained. Seiya ignored them, feigning innocence. Both outside parties left the conference room, and after stewing for a few minutes, Isuzu spoke up: "Are you... certain about this?"

Seiya said nothing.

"There's no way... to save everyone in the park," Isuzu admitted. "And I don't know what will happen to Her Highness."

"Yeah, true," he agreed.

"If the park does change... Lord Moffle may leave," she went on. "As will I."

"Same here. They'll find an excuse to axe me off the bat."

"But then...!" Isuzu began, then stifled herself. "Ah... forgive me. It's not as though I have a better idea..."

"Right."

"I'm so tired of this conference," she sighed. "I just want to run away."

"Same here.?" In that instant, somewhere in the back of Seiya's mind, an idea arose. "What did you just say?"

"I'm tired of it."

"Not that... wait, wait..."

"Seiya-kun?"

"Wait a minute. Let me think... hmm..." The vague idea that had been hanging

in his mind began to take genuine shape. A better way of doing things. A more clever approach... Was this what people called inspiration? “Hey, Sento,” he said.

“Yes?”

“I’m hungry. Why don’t we forget those jerks and grab a bite somewhere?”

Isuzu stared in disbelief. “What are you saying?”

“Just what it sounds like,” he explained. “This isn’t fun, so let’s ditch.”

“But... we can’t, can we?”

“Hmm... I guess not. We’ll wait a little longer, then.” He fiddled with the conference room’s monitor and to put on some TV. Some pointless variety show was on; entertainers on a tiered stand were saying funny things. Seiya cleared his mind and enjoyed it.

About thirty minutes later, Mackey and “Kurayama” returned to the conference room.

“Apologies for the wait.”

“Haha! Yeah, sorry ’bout that!”

They must have really racked their brains in taking a scalpel to their conditions. neither wanted the other one to have the park.

But Seiya’s response was: “Sorry, but I’ve decided to turn you both down.”

The whole room went silent for a moment. Even Isuzu was unable to speak.

“Haha...?”

“And what... do you mean by that, exactly?” each said.

Seiya just waved a hand in annoyance, eyes locked on the variety show. “I’m turning down your proposals. I realized it was stupid, so we’re done. We’ll handle things ourselves from here on out. Go home.”

Mackey and “Kurayama” both flew into a rage, too angry at first to even speak.

“Haha...? What are you saying? You’re dead at the rate you’re going. Don’t

you realize that? How can you—”

“Shut up and get out, you plague rat,” Seiya told him flatly.

“Huh?!”

“You have a shoot in California, right? So forget our lousy park.”

“...Haha! How dare you...”

“I told you to get lost.” Seiya took his eyes off the TV at last and glared straight at him. He activated his magic (we’ll spare you the details). “You don’t want your wife to know the games you’re playing with your little secretary, do you? And I don’t want to tell her. So go home.”

“Haha...” Laughing, Mackey took his leave.

Seiya then turned to “Kurayama.” “Are you still here? Leave.”

“...What exactly is your game here?” His tone was understandably guarded; his suspicion outstripped his anger.

“I’ve changed my mind,” Seiya said shortly. “And I’m sick of looking at your stupid face.”

“But you’re in such dire straits—”

“Shut up,” Seiya said, conveying his utter disgust with the process. “I’m sick to death of you. No matter what dirty tricks you try to pull, my allies and I will stop you. We’ll make it through this.”

“What are you saying?” “Kurayama” asked. “How will you possibly call in three million people—”

“—With no help? I actually have a great idea; I’m just not telling you what it is. You’re completely insignificant to me. We’re going to blast through whatever twisted game you’re playing. My team knows we can do it. Because...” Seiya took a deep breath, and then declared: “Ours is the best park in Japan.”

“.....” “Kurayama” was caught off-guard by this response.

“You hear that?” Seiya demanded aggressively. “Now, tuck tail and run.”

Idina did just that.

When Seiya revealed the truth about the man who had just left, Isuzu was furious. He was their hated enemy, after all. Nevertheless, tears filled her eyes as she said, “I don’t know why, but I feel relieved...”

“Do you? I’m knee-deep in regret, myself,” he whispered with a sigh. He’d thrown away his one sure chance at keeping the park alive. He couldn’t even imagine how hard the road ahead of them would be now. “But... and I don’t know why...” Seiya said, feeling suddenly refreshed. “For some reason, I’m really enjoying myself right now.”

Soon after, Seiya got a call from Moffle. Latifah had woken up and spoken with him, he said. She had regained her memory. She was the Latifah from their date the other day.

Seiya wasn’t especially surprised to hear it. *Yeah, sounds about right*, was the extent of his thoughts on the matter.

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Seiya’s first act the next day was to order a broken-down Sorcerer’s Hill attraction— needless to say, it was the merry-go-round—fixed. He didn’t know all the details yet, but apparently that merry-go-round had a history; it had been imported from France in the early days of the Showa period, and it was highly coveted by obsessives. Of course, the repairs would take such a huge chunk out of their budget, that just a few days ago, he would never have considered it.

The budget manager Ashe had grumbled about it, asking him, “are you serious?”

But of course he was serious. The money was no object. That merry-go-round was important; it was the park’s soul, in a way. Luckily, Mogute chief Taramo assured them they could restore it to its original beauty in only a week.

Dr. Obiza’s inspection revealed that Latifah had made a complete recovery. In fact, there was room for debate regarding the word “complete”— at the very least, she was herself again, but her health remained poor, suggesting exhaustion.

She was still asleep in her bedroom when Seiya came to visit her. The princess, sleeping peacefully in her canopy bed, was the true picture of innocence. Seiya sat down beside her and started speaking, in a half-joking tone. “You’re so greedy.”

Latifah didn’t respond. She just breathed quietly in the rhythms of sleep, her chest moving slightly up and down.

“Making me do all this, *and* insisting that I enjoy myself the whole time... Still, I think maybe I can do it. And... I don’t really know, but... I’m starting to see, vaguely... no, it’s not even to that point yet...”

She didn’t respond.

“...It’s just, yesterday, I think I managed to avoid the worst choice I could have made. ...The most boring choice, I guess. If I’d made a deal with those guys... you probably know this, but you’d never have made it back.”

Again, she didn’t respond.

“I’m kind of at all ends, here,” Seiya admitted. “Things aren’t going to turn out perfectly. But... that’s why I really do need you. You’re not powerless. Don’t devalue yourself anymore. ...Hey, Latifah. You hear me?”

Of course she can’t was the assumption he’d been making—so when when she finally opened her eyes, he was so shocked he almost fell out of his seat.

“Yes, I do,” she told him.

“.....?!” Seiya was shocked.

“Forgive me,” Latifah apologized. “It was not my intention to feign sleep, of course...”

“H-How much did you hear?”

“F-Forgive me, but... everything... Beginning with the part about my greed...”

“Forget I said that,” Seiya insisted.

“I fear that I cannot. However...” She giggled. “I do not know exactly what you meant, but... have I managed to be of use to you? It seemed as if... that was what you were saying.”

“Don’t tell anyone.”

“I would not dream of it.” Latifah smiled at him. It was a perfectly gorgeous smile. “And, as for my response...”

“Yes?” He immediately regretted bringing it up. Latifah didn’t know about the conversation they’d had in the shadow world. “It’s... well...”

“Yes?” she said hesitantly.

Seiya froze up. He was terrified. Petrified. In the end, he didn’t have an answer. Despite all that had happened, when he was here in front of her like this... “Ah, never mind. Forget it.”

“...Very well.” This response of hers had a slightly different tone than the others, but Seiya couldn’t hear it.

Brilliant Report

Subject: Excerpt of Articles
To: Kanie Seiya (cc: Sento Isuzu)
From: Head of Operations Tricen

Greetings. Tricen here. I have put together a collection of interviews held between various publications and our park employees. Please look them over.
(Note: Most of these are with magical realm newspapers and trade magazines rather than mortal media.) It appears that public opinion of our park on the upswing these days. I am forced to hunch forward in delight.

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[From Mapleburg Post, one of Maple Land’s leading national newspapers]

The General’s Revenge: Is the royal *ager* really making a comeback?

Following a miraculous turnaround in March of this year, the royal *ager* Amagi Brilliant Park is on a hot streak, chu.

Amagi Brilliant Park, after selling part of its land to mortal corporation Malmart and forging an exclusive contract with the legendary Mogute Clan in April, has been rapidly executing renovations and updates to major attendance gains, chu. The growth rate is over ten times that of the past year, and many mortal world *ager* and *animus* companies are taking note of Amagi Brilliant Park’s trajectory, chu.

I stopped by the park everyone’s talking about to speak to Lord Moffle mel Morsenus, chu.

(Tokyo Branch: Nezunezu Chukite)

—General Morsenus. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule,

chu. May I call you Moffle-san, chu?

Moffle: "If you like. You people have written a lot of trash about me in the past, you know. 'The queen's younger brother idles his days away at a fading *ager*,' and such..."

—Chu, chu! That must have been before my time! That wasn't me, chu!

Moffle: "I see, fumo. ...But the Mapleburg Post does a lot of shoddy journalism that annoys me, fumo. You should check on that, fumo."

—Th-That's slander, chu! And coming from someone with royal connections, it could be construed as censorship, chu!

Moffle: "...For the love of... That's how everyone in your field talks, fumo. Ah, well. Ask your questions, fumo."

—Thank you, chu. Now, Moffle-san... Everyone in Maple Land has been shocked by AmaBri's rise, chu. Would you be the one most responsible for its success, chu?

Moffle: "Not at all, fumo."

—But that's the angle my editor wants, chu.

Moffle: "Don't interview a man with the result already in mind, fumo! What are you, Gaki no Tsukai?!"

—No need to be so angry... Anyway, can I still say you're responsible, chu?

Moffle: "I said no, fumo. I'm doing my duties as headlining mascot, but that's all."

—So? Are you saying someone else is responsible, chu?

Moffle: "Moffu (affirmative). Everyone's contributing to our success, fumo. But if I had to name the person most responsible, it would have to be our acting manager, Kanie Seiya, fumo."

—Kanie Seiya. Is he a mortal, chu?

Moffle: "Moffu (affirmative)."

—I have some questions about that too, chu. There's precedent for leaving government *ager* to mortal management, chu.

Moffle: “Moffu. I hear that was a long time ago, but yeah. It’s not as if it’s illegal, fumo.”

—True, it’s not illegal, chu. But some people might call it politically risky, chu. Relying on a mortal to help us gather the *animus* we magical realm residents need to survive... opposition party senators assert that it poses a risk to the independence of the magical realms.

Moffle: “Hmph. Who cares what those opposition morons say, fumo?”

—What a bombshell, chu! Can I really write that down?!

Moffle: “Moffu. We’re on the front lines here, fumo. Fat cats who sit around importing *animus* from Digimalland can’t know what we go through, fumo.”

—It’s true that Maple Land’s *animus* self-sufficiency has been on a downward trend, chu. If AmaBri were to close, it might never recover.

Moffle: “That’s right. We’d risk becoming dependent on other realms for our energy supply, fumo. If we want to hold our ground, we need to keep the park in business, even if it means asking mortals for help, fumo.”

—But magical realm globalization is in full swing as well, chu. Some feel that, rather than leaving inefficient government *agers* in place, we should shift over to full *animus* importation to focus on other fields.

Moffle: “I’m aware of that opinion, fumo. But the techniques for gathering *animus* should remain as national policy, fumo. Once lost, these techniques (entertainment techniques) can’t be regained so easily, fumo. It would put us in a disadvantage in crucial trade negotiations, fumo.”

—Is that a criticism of the king’s policies, chu?

Moffle: “No, fumo. I’m sure the king has his reasons for doing what he does, and I respect that. Of course, I have plenty of other complaints about that wishy-washy pervert, if you want to hear ’em.”

—What a scoop, chu! C-Can I write that too, chu?!

Moffle: “Moffu. Yeah, go ahead. Send it to the king and have him read it, fumo. All it’ll do is hurt and depress him.”

—Amazing, chu. That’s the great general of the Maple Land Third Division,

chu.

Moffle: “Flattery won’t get you anywhere, fumo. And stop calling me ‘great general,’ fumo.”

—Okay, chu. But this is a perfect chance, Moffle-san, for us to segue into your career, chu.

Moffle: “Moffu.”

—As a general, you led us to victory in Operation Sweet Storm. Now you do juggling to entertain children in an *ager*, chu. What do you really think about this change in circumstances, chu?

Moffle: “It’s fine. Entertainment’s a better fit for my personality, fumo. And debating with bigwigs at staff meetings isn’t fundamentally different from dealing with guests in the park, fumo.”

—Chu? What do you mean?

Moffle: “They both make me tired of dealing with children (laughs).”

—(laughs) Oh, you made me laugh at something I shouldn’t have, chu. You’re terrible, Moffle-san.

Moffle: “Sorry, fumo.”

—Well, let’s change the subject, chu. Regarding the rest of the park staff, I’d like to ask about Yisuzurch Sentolucia-san, the royal guard member who’s been dispatched there, chu.

Moffle: “You mean Sento Isuzu, fumo?”

—Do you two get along, chu?

Moffle: “I’d say we do, fumo. Though it’s annoying that she shoots me any time I tease her, fumo.”

—Lady Sentolucia is the granddaughter of Representative Yisuzurch, an influential man in the Maple Land Senate, isn’t she? Has that made certain things harder, or led to conflict in any way?

Moffle: “No, fumo. At least not that I can think of right now, fumo. Actually, I’d forgotten she was also from a noble family, fumo...”

—Is she in any romantic relationships?

Moffle: "...No, fumo. She's single, despite her large breasts."

—Really? She's not seeing anyone behind the scenes, chu? I'd love to know, chu.

Moffle: "Moffu. I told you, no. ...Aren't you a national newspaper? Why are you trafficking in tabloid gossip, fumo?"

—Forgive me, chu. It was a matter of personal interest, chu. ...Moving on. I'd like to hear more about Archamreal-san, chu.

Moffle: "Who's that? Archam... what, fumo?"

—Ashe ahm Archamreal, chu. AmaBri's head of finance, chu. What brought a former Schubert Empire undersecretary of the treasury to your park? I'd like to hear more about that, chu.

Moffle: "Ashe was their undersecretary of of the treasury? For real, fumo?"

—You didn't know, chu?

Moffle: "Moffu. First I've heard of it. I never even knew her full name before now, fumo."

—Schubert and Maple Land have a friendly relationship, chu. But having another country's former high official handling your *ager's* finances has gotten political tongues wagging. I'd like to get a comment, chu.

Moffle: "I don't know what to say... Ashe does a good job. She's as responsible for our success as Kanie Seiya is, fumo. Besides, *agers* are always run by a mix of staff from various countries, fumo. Digimalland even employs Maple Land citizens. It's not that unusual, fumo. As for why she's come to work for us... I'm sure she had her reasons. That's life, fumo."

—Oh, really? Then let me ask about the Mogute Clan next, chu.

Moffle: "Taramo and his crew? They've been a big help to us, fumo."

—The Mogute Clan are a legendary construction company, chu. Rumors say Polytear's previous regime tried to have them buried alive. How did you find them and get them to sign their first exclusive contract in history, chu?

Moffle: “Leaving the details aside, I suppose that one’s on our manager, fumo. She has a way with people, fumo.”

—Are you referring to Princess Latifah, chu?

Moffle: “Yeah. Taramo’s men feel like they owe her. And their skill at carpentry means that renovations that would have taken six months can be done in a week, fumo. We’re all glad to have them, fumo.”

—There appear to be a number of secrets to your comeback success. I guess the renovations were a big contributor, chu?

Moffle: “Moffu. They were, fumo.”

—You mentioned Princess Latifah before. There are rumors that she bestowed magic upon Kanie Seiya, chu.

Moffle: “M-Moffu...”

—Women of the royal bloodline can bestow magic on mortals through mouth-to-mouth contact, chu. If that rumor is true, wouldn’t it represent a major scandal for the royal family?

Moffle: “Too bad it’s not true, fumo.”

—In addition, it’s said that royal magic is exceptionally powerful, chu. Powerful enough that even the chief royal magician couldn’t oppose it, chu. If the princess gave magic to Kanie Seiya, doesn’t that create a threat to national security, chu?

Moffle: “I’m going to repeat myself: It’s not true, fumo. The princess has maintained her chastity for more than ten years, fumo. Besides, she’s been laid up sick for much of that time; it’s possible she doesn’t even have that power, fumo.”

—Really, chu? But I’ve heard rumors that she’s actually fairly active, chu. Last March, a girl who very much resembled the princess appeared in the park’s 30 yen campaign swimsuit video stream.

Moffle: “Th-That was a mortal model, fumo! I’d never let her do anything so demeaning on my watch, fumo!”

—It’s true that your affection for the princess is well known among royal

watchers, chu.

Moffle: "...Say whatever you want, fumo. It's about time for my show, so can we draw this to a close?"

—Chu. Could I have one last comment about Kanie Seiya, the key figure behind AmaBri's revival, chu?

Moffle: "He's not a bad kid, fumo."

—Thank chu very much.

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[From a trade magazine, Monthly Ager]

Column: Let's Ask Aquario: the Secrets of the Popular Quartet?

As the government *ager* Amagi Brilliant Park skyrockets in popularity, the attraction most popular with fathers must be Aquario; it's a modern day "Dragon's Palace," featuring four dancing beauties. We caught up with the four dancers in the middle of practicing their new program and had an interview.

(Editorial Department)

—First, introduce yourselves, and tell us your best feature.

Muse: "I'm Muse! I'm the Fairy of Water! I'm sort of the leader of the four. My best feature is... hmm. My fingers? I think?"

Salama: "(while playing with her smartphone) Salama. Spirit of Fire. I don't have a best feature."

Kobory: "Um, I'm the Spirit of Earth, Kobory. I'm not sure what my best feature is... my hair, maybe? I get compliments about it sometimes..."

Sylphie: "I'm Sylphie! Spirit of Wind! My best feature is my digestion!"

—Thank you very much. Now, what's your special talent?

Muse: "Hmm, singing and dancing, I'd say. Though I still have a long way to go!"

Salama: “(while playing with her smartphone) Special talent? I don’t have one.”

Kobory: “I’m pretty good at... drawing. And fantasizing... I mean, daydreaming...”

Sylphie: “Me, me, me! Bobsledding!”

—Now, what’s your least favorite thing?

Muse: “Let me see... the cold, I think? Also, bugs.”

Salama: “Nothing in particular. (after being rebuked by Muse) ...Huh? This is so dumb... fine, I hate my annoying leader. (further abuse of Muse omitted)”

Kobory: “Dancing and stuff... um, I guess that feels weird to say that, since I’m a dancer...”

Sylphie: “Hmm... Cutting my nails past the quick?”

—Tell us more about Aquario.

Muse: “It’s a wonderful musical attraction that incorporates special effects and wirework! I hope you’ll all come and see it!”

Salama: “By the way, if it features spirits for all four base elements, why is it called Aquario? I’ve been wondering. ‘Aqua’ means water.”

Muse: (stammers)

Kobory: “Um, um... I think the attraction already had that name when we got here, so... I don’t think it’s Muse-san’s fault.”

Sylphie: “Idea! New name: Elementario!”

—What makes your musical special?

Muse: “Our totally in-sync dancing! We’ve been practicing really, really hard. Come see us, okay?”

Salama: “What makes it special, huh? The sexy costumes, I guess? Lately, the front row has been packed with these old guys, nostrils flaring... Like it’s a strip joint or something.”

Kobory: “Um. We’ve made some basic upgrades since the year started. The

lighting has been digitized, and we installed more speakers, so the sound quality is much better than last year. I actually helped out with that, and it was really hard, so... I hope you'll come and see it."

Sylphie: "Dor-yan is so strict... *(Ed: Is she referring to Dornell, the stage director? I don't see how that's special, but I'm leaving the comment in unaltered.)*"

—Are there any attractions you recommend besides Aquario?

Muse: "Probably Moffle-senpai's House of Sweets... I don't quite know why it's so popular, but it's been a real education for me. And of course, lots of guests enjoy it, so you should really stop by just once!"

Salama: "Recommended attractions? Maybe the merry-go-round. It's tucked away in a corner, so it doesn't get much attention, but it's pretty old, you know? It was special ordered from Europe during the early Showa era, when the place was still Amagi Playground. Huh? What? What's wrong with me saying something sincere?"

Kobory: "Let's see... Personally, I like Planet Dinosaur. It's a dinosaur attraction in Wild Valley, and I really like the five dinosaurs who serve as your guides. They have some really nice shipping dynamics... well, Tricen-san aside... but it just inspires my creativity. No wait, forget I said that!"

Sylphie: "Of course! I most recommend Aquario! (it's pointed out that I said "other than Aquario") ...Oh. Then, Elementario!"

—Lastly, please give a message to the readers of Monthly Ager.

Muse: "Hmm... I never thought I'd get to give an interview like this. I'm so grateful! Please come to see us in person on stage!"

Salama: "None in particular. (after being scolded by Muse) ...Huh? Umm... okay, if you have time, come to see us. Also, you don't have to follow my account. It's just kind of creepy."

Kobory: "Hey, art group friends, are you watching? Great job at the recent Sankuri!"

Sylphie: "If you come by? Woosh! I'll give you some botamochi!"

—Thank you all for coming.

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[From Maple Land music magazine Monthly Pockin' Ron]

How much of a Fairy of Music is Macaron? The Myths and Facts About the Rebellious Sheep

Amagi Brilliant Park has been making an serious comeback. Part of the reason for its shining ascendance is music.

We talked to the Fairy of Music, Macaron McSecaron, the park's second-most popular star and producer of its music.

[Interview, text: Nobino Prarie]

—Thanks for having me today, rii. I have a lot of questions for you, rii.

Macaron: “I’ll tell you all I can, ron. But try not to ask anything too personal, ron.”

—You mean like about your ex-wife and your child support woes, rii?

Macaron: “That wasn’t a cue to do it, ron!”

—I beg your pardon, rii.

Macaron: “Anyway, I’ve been keeping up with those lately, ron. I’ve been able to see my daughter as a result.”

—Oh, good for you, rii. But that’s not very rock, is it, rii?

Macaron: “You can take your rock and shove it, ron.”

—Harsh, rii. Rock is our specialty here. While we’re at it, I’d like to ask a little more about your taste in music, rii. You like rock, rii?

Macaron: “Not especially. About as much as anyone does, ron.”

—But don’t you sometimes do thrash metal on stage, rii?

Macaron: “Only because it’s more accessible to most customers, ron. I’d much rather be doing gangsta rap, but it slows turnover, and nobody gets it,

ron... puff!"

—That's something I wanted to ask about, rii. Why rap, rii?

Macaron: "It's where my roots are, ron. If you want to get ahead in Macaronia, you either become a rapper or a mascot, ron."

—Those are some pretty polar opposite choices, rii.

Macaron: "I'm a pretty talented fairy, so I can perform in most genres. But rap is what I always did with my local crew. I just want to be true to where I came from, ron."

—I see. By the way, what do you think about the music used in the park, rii?

Macaron: "Well, it's for families, so there have to be a lot of compromises, ron. That doesn't mean I'm a sellout. I just respect the mood of the place, ron."

—Do you perform all of it too, Macaron-san?

Macaron: "Most of it. Funding's limited, so we have to do a lot with step recording, ron. It's not like I've ever played a harp before."

—Tell me about your favorite instrument lately, rii.

Macaron: "Instrument? Blues guitar, I'd say. I got a slide guitar that works with my hooves, so I practice when I have time, ron."

—Like Elmore James?

Macaron: "Oh. You know him, ron? Nice. ...Well, I tried playing it at the entrance recently, but the guests didn't take to it very well, ron..."

—The suffering of a fairy of music, rii. By the way, you're leading the park's idol unit, right? Task Force ABC?

Macaron: "Yeah. They're... I wouldn't call them an idol unit, exactly. They just go around to entertain local businesses, seniors in the old folks' homes and such. It's not like we're trying to really break out or anything, ron."

—What are the ABC girls like, rii?

Macaron: "They're newbie part-timers, ron. That's really all they are. They're going in with the best of intentions, ron."

—But the new song you composed for them, I Don't Give a Puff, is selling quite well, rii. Especially in Maple Land.

Macaron: “Just like it says, I don't give a puff, ron. I composed it because my acting manager, Kanie-kun, told me to write a song. And you know, ron? It's pretty fun hearing three industrious cuties say the word “puff” a lot, ron.”

—That's very true, rii! It's rock in its own way, rii. The Task Force ABC trio are all mortals. Do they know what “puff” really means, rii?

Macaron: “No. I haven't told them either, ron. Isn't it funnier if they say it without knowing, ron?”

—That's an interesting question, rii. Personally I'd prefer to see them perform with embarrassment and tears in their eyes just after learning it, rii.

Macaron: “Hmmm. Tiramii said the same thing, ron. Maybe I'll think about it some day.”

—I can't wait, rii. Thanks for coming today, rii!

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[From Maple Land men's magazine Weekly Playfairy]

Let's Learn More About Her! Part 238

Everyone's been talking about that newly prospering *ager*, Amagi Brilliant Park! But did you know it's packed with breathtaking beauties?!

This week we're introducing AmaBri's secretary, secretly rising in popularity, Sento Isuzu-kun. She was trained as a Maple Land royal guard, but she's also got a dynamite body.

We sent one of our editors to probe the secrets of this sexy and elite walking pile of pheromones!

[Reporter: Pomerin Wankol]

—Thanks for agreeing to this interview today!

Isuzu-kun: “Not at all. Our head of administration made the introduction.

But... Playfair? I'm afraid I'm not familiar with that publication."

—Oh! It's a gentleman's magazine. By gentlemen, for gentlemen! Most women don't know much about it!

Isuzu-kun: "I see... I'm merely a secretary at the moment, so I'm sure there will be a great deal I can't answer. Is that all right?"

—It's just fine! Let's start with your measurements!

Isuzu-kun: ".....? Does that have anything to do with the park?"

—Yes! Measurementology is a long-standing method of fortunetelling in the Tiradaho region. It's very accurate. We do it with all the magical realm celebrities. Knowing your measurements will give us a window into the future of Amagi Brilliant Park!

Isuzu-kun: "Did you say you were born in Tiradaho?"

—I was, mii! Oops, I just slipped into my hometown accent!

Isuzu-kun: "...I see. I'm getting a bad feeling about this. There's a member of our cast born in Tiradaho, as well..."

—Never mind that! Just give me your measurements!

Isuzu-kun: "I'm afraid I don't have them. I've never taken them."

—Then let's do that! I have a measuring tape with me right now! Stand up, hold out your arms... hey, where are you pointing that gun? Stop that!

Isuzu-kun: "I don't need my fortune told. Ask a different question."

—I beg your pardon. That's really too bad... Anyway, a serious question!

Isuzu-kun: "If you please."

—How old were you when you first saw a naked man?

(The reporter was shot dead)

Isuzu-kun: "Was that a serious question?"

—(reviving) ...I beg your pardon. It's another Tiradaho fortunetelling method... Hey, please don't point that gun at me again!

Isuzu-kun: "Ask a different question."

—Okay! A different question. White, yellow, pink. Please assign each color to one of your castmates.

Isuzu-kun: “Colors? Castmates?”

—Yes. White, yellow, and pink. If you please.

Isuzu-kun: “Hmm. White... Macaron, I think.”

—Okay. That’s the fairy from the Music Theater, right?

Isuzu-kun: “Yellow would be Lord Moffle. Pink would be Tiramii, I suppose.”

—Tiramii-san. That’s the fairy who runs the Flower Adventure, right?

Isuzu-kun: “Yes. What of it?”

—Ta-daa! That was actually a psychological test. White represents the person you want to marry. Yellow is the person you most admire. And pink is... the person you want to puff! Ahahaha! Ahahaha! Ahahahahahahaha!!

(The reporter is shot to death violently and repeatedly)

Isuzu-kun: “Don’t be disgusting.”

—(reviving) But this psychological test is extremely accurate. About 42%—

Isuzu-kun: “That sounds less like a psychological test and more like a party game. ...And the three I mentioned just happen to be that color. Macaron is white, Moffle is yellow, and Tiramii is pink. That’s all.”

—(clicks tongue) Aw. No fun!

(The reporter is shot to death repeatedly and offhandedly)

Isuzu-kun: “Are you going to ask serious questions or not?”

—(offhandedly reviving) Okay. I think I’ll finally ask a serious question. ...You work as the secretary to the acting manager, right? It sounds really hard.

Isuzu-kun: “It’s not, really. We’re all in this together.

—Oh, I mean for the people around you. I bet a body like yours gets a lot of looks in the workplace! And as a secretary, you must wear a body-hugging skirtsuit sometimes! Even I can’t stop staring at your chest and thighs!

Isuzu-kun: “.....”



—That’s what I meant when I asked if it was hard. Do you see? Do you understand what I’m getting at?

Isuzu-kun: “Why are you acting like this? (flustered)”

—Okay, tell me how it feels to be a woman who gets all the men staring at her! Be candid! In particular, how do you feel about your chest? Eh? Because those tits are dynamite! Come over here, mii! Come here and let me touch them, mii!

(The reporter is shot to death)

Isuzu-kun: “This is extremely gross.”

—(reviving) Excuse me! Next question!

Isuzu-kun: “Let’s get this over with.”

—How would you feel about doing a photo spread for our magazine?!

(The reporter is shot to death)

—(reviving) It would skyrocket our sales! Don’t worry, we’ll edit out the juiciest bits...

(The reporter is shot to death)

—(reviving) S-So, if you got an offer to... er, do AVs...

(The reporter is shot to death)

—(reviving) I’m sorry, please do— (The reporter is shot to death)

—(reviving) Sto—

(The reporter is shot to death)

—Forgi—

(The reporter is shot for the rest of eternity) × × ×

RE: Excerpt of Articles

To: Head of Administration Tricen (cc: Sento Isuzu) From: Kanie Seiya

Kanie here. I looked through the articles. Here’s what we’ll do about them.

1. Re: Mapleburg Post

Moffle seemed to be aiming for gaffes, and he succeeded. I don't know much about Maple Land's politics, but they seem complicated, so I'll need an in-depth report about that later. And next time, I'll sit in on the interview with him.

2: Re: Monthly Ager

This is fine. No issues with Muse's responses. They're great. We need to find a way to shut the other three up, or educate them about how to deal with the media.

3: Re: Monthly Pockin' Ron

It's a music magazine, so I think he's trying to pander to their core audience. There's a lot of stuff in there we wouldn't want the general public to hear. In the future, send Tricen or Sento in on interviews with him.

4: Re: Weekly Playfair

What the hell was with that perv reporter? Now I see why Sento was in such a bad mood that day. I also see why she shot you for introducing her to him.

Poor Sento. Never let that reporter in here again.

It's just a good thing I didn't let him meet Latifah; Moffle would have killed him.

Afterword

With production on the anime almost finished, I was spending a lot of time vegging out or working on small tasks. The next thing I knew, it had been six months since volume five. I'm sorry! You let your guard down for a second and the irresponsibility overtakes you. It's really a tricky thing.

I just fooled around playing games, fell asleep reading complicated books, read Taiga history manga with jaw agape... I was in a really self-indulgent place around the end of December. As a result, when I started this volume, it was really hard to get in the groove! "How do you even write? I forget!" That's about how I was feeling. It's like when a pitcher skips practice; you start losing your "stuff" in no time flat. It wasn't good. I'm very sorry. (Though in fact, I feel like I've been in this cycle for close to 20 years now!)

Now, let's get to the story.

Volumes two through five were mainly short stories, so this time, I decided to do a long-form story mainly about Seiya-kun, like the first volume. When he's the main character, everything gets really serious. It gets tiring to only ever focus on that, so volume seven will be back to short, silly stories, I think. ...And really, that's the stuff I want to do more of!

It seems there has been more secret development(?) in the various relationships, but I wonder how it'll all turn out. I haven't actually decided yet. Send your requests to Fujimi Shobo!

By the way, the pirate Ironbeard and the shark Jaw who show up at the start were original characters from episode seven of the anime adaptation. I don't know if it was a coincidence or not, but Tanaka Masahiko-san, who played Gauron in the *Full Metal Panic!* anime played Ironbeard, and Miki Shinichiro who played Kurz Weber played Jaw. If you haven't watched it yet, do it! It's funny!

Oh, right. Speaking of the anime, it's just been a short three months since it

ended. I'm relieved that it was so well received. It's great! Incidentally, the anime develops and ends differently than the books. I was grateful to be able to write situations and lines that I didn't put into the original story (I actually wrote the script for episode 12). When I was writing volume one, I didn't really think much about how Latifah really felt, but thanks to Director Takemoto and the rest of the staff, I've been able to add a lot of depth. I'm honored and grateful. A lot of things here in volume six also occurred to me while I was working on the anime. When you're working with a unique setting that has so many characters, there are limits to how many things a single creator can come up with. So I got lots of visuals, sounds, music, and other things from the anime adaptation. What a life! I'd better work hard or I'll wreak some divine punishment.

Hmm, I guess I have about two pages left.

Let me write about my current situation. I bought a PS4 at the end of the year. I like how fast it boots up. I've been playing *Watch Dogs*, *GTA5*, and *Shadow of Mordor*.

Watch Dogs is a sandbox game where the protagonist walks around looking at his smartphone, causing trouble for passersby. It's hilarious. *GTA5* is awesome because the character Trevor is so obsessive. Scooter brothers! *Shadow of Mordor* is a game based on Lord of the Rings. I use my Celebrimbor stand and slay orcs and climb the ladder. The phrase "Celebrimbor stand" might not mean anything to fans of the books, but it's really fun, so I recommend it.

I was playing three games that all have a ton of content, so people are starting to get mad at me: "Stop playing around! Do some work!" and that's... probably for the best. It's all in the past (I say, suddenly defiant).

And then... let's see. I went to the supermarket yesterday and they were selling sake made from Kubota manju (very rare), but it was 20,000 yen, so I didn't buy it. I think I've gotten a crush on the counter girl at the coffee shop I visit regularly, so I listen in on her conversations and end up not focusing on my manuscript. My desktop PC broke (it's probably the video card dying) and I can't work up the energy to fix it, so I've just let it sit there for over two months.

That's about all there's been. Really, it's all pretty pointless stuff. Sorry.

Anyway, I'm going to work hard on volume seven. ...Well, it'll be more a series of silly anecdotes, rather than a heavy story I need to work hard on. Bye!

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Amagi Brilliant Park: Volume 6

by Shouji Gatou

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis Edited by Dana Allen

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